



## Access to GP Appointments - Detailed Findings

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Between December 2015 and February 2016 Healthwatch Northumberland worked on a countywide project to better understand patients' experiences of accessing GP appointments and the systems used by GP practices. Both patients and GP practices were contacted for their feedback and other sources information were also examined.

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# Introduction

## Background

Throughout 2015, feedback from the public has highlighted access to GP appointments as a key issue in Northumberland, in terms of the time patients have to wait between requesting an appointment and seeing their GP, as well as different ways access to GP appointments is offered. There has also been some feedback about how long patients wait beyond their appointment time until they are seen by their GP. However, this does sit alongside much positive feedback from patients about their GP services.

These comments have been shared regularly with the relevant service providers and commissioners and we have been monitoring this feedback through our Access to Healthcare Task Group. However, based on the feedback received up to that point it was difficult to identify whether the issues highlighted related to particular GP practices or localities. The Access to Healthcare Task Group recommended that this issue was explored in more detail to help us understand the scope and scale of the problem for patients as well as look at what patients say works well for them with regards to the delivery of GP services so that it can be usefully shared.

## Aims of Project

The aims of this project were therefore to find out how patients in Northumberland access GP appointments by:

- Analysing feedback from our Access to GP Appointments patient survey
- Reviewing feedback received in the last six months
- Contacting GP practices for information
- Obtaining information from practice websites
- Engaging with Patient Participation Groups
- Holding drop-in sessions at GP practices to talk to patients face to face
- Telephone surveys with patients
- Reviewing other available data

From this, we were keen to better understand:

- How patients access appointments at their practice (e.g. can a patient phone up and get an appointment, is there a specific time that they have to call the practice, is there a telephone triage system in place, if so who triages the calls)
- How appointments are booked (e.g. are telephone appointments offered, if so how do they work, how many enquiries are resolved through phone contact, how many enquiries require a GP appointment)
- If the practice offers 'urgent' appointments, does the practice define what they mean by 'urgent'
- Do GP practices signpost patients to other services that may be able to offer appropriate help, such as pharmacies

- How long do patients wait for a GP appointment
- How long do patients wait for an appointment to see a particular GP
- How long do patients wait to be seen when they have an appointment

## Method

Prior to the project, the brief was discussed with Northumberland Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) who informed us about a similar piece of work they are undertaking in order to assess and identify any “Capacity and Demand” issues within GP practices. It was agreed that the two projects involved minimal duplication and that they would complement each other with regards to informing the development of the Primary and Acute Care System (PACS) Vanguard in Northumberland. This report will be shared with the relevant service providers and commissioners.

The two surveys described below were designed to provide us with a 'snapshot' of the current situation in Northumberland; evidently patients' and GP practices' experiences vary week to week (e.g. due to staff holiday, working patterns and absences).

### 1.) GP Practices Questionnaire

A questionnaire was produced for GP practices to share information about their booking systems and procedures (see Appendix 1). All 44 GP practices were contacted by telephone and given the opportunity to answer the questions verbally. Alternatively, the questionnaire could be completed electronically via email or Survey Monkey. Northumberland CCG also encouraged GP practices to participate in the survey.

### 2.) Patient Questionnaire

A questionnaire was also produced to gather feedback about patients' experiences of accessing GP appointments (see Appendix 2). This was available in hard copies (including large print) as well as being accessible online for completion via Survey Monkey. This questionnaire was shared with all of our individual (518) and organisation (301) supporters and was shared at events and meetings across Northumberland. Key partners also encouraged members of the public to complete the survey and it was promoted via social media, including Twitter and Facebook.

### Additional Sources of Data

In addition to the Healthwatch Northumberland patient questionnaire and GP practice questionnaire, we also:

- Reviewed feedback received by Healthwatch Northumberland (July-December 2015) (Appendix 3)
- Engaged with Patient Participation Groups (PPG) - many of our supporters are members of their GP practice's PPG. They completed the patient survey and encouraged others within their GP practice to do so too.
- Held drop-in sessions at GP practices to speak to patients face-to-face. We decided to do this at Blyth Acute Service to get feedback from patients about the pilot site for the new model of delivery.

- Conducted telephone surveys with patients - it was decided to not actively pursue this due to the numbers of patients already reached online and using the paper questionnaires.
- Reviewed other available sources of data including:
  - NHS choices reviews (Appendix 4)
  - The National GP Patient Survey - Northumberland results (Appendix 5)
  - CQC inspection reports (Appendix 6)
  - Northumberland CCG Patient Forum feedback (Appendix 7)
  - Information provided on GP practice websites (Appendix 8)

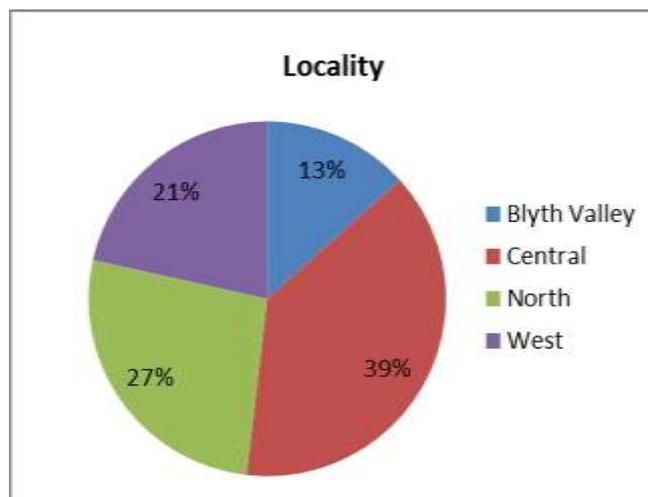
On the whole, the other sources of information which we examined offer additional support for the conclusions and recommendations drawn in this report and reflect the feedback obtained in our Access to GP appointments patient survey.

## Respondents

### Patient Questionnaire

In total, 136 patients participated in the survey; 45 paper copies of the questionnaire were returned and 91 people completed the survey online (via Survey Monkey).

With regards to the geographical location of the respondents and the practices at which they are registered, we received responses from across the county. A breakdown of which geographical area/CCG locality respondents reside in is presented in the graph below (27% North Northumberland, 13% Blyth Valley, 39% Central Northumberland and 21% West Northumberland). Numbers of patient responses, by GP practice, are presented in Appendix 10 - this table also includes a breakdown of whether patients' experiences of accessing their GP were generally positive, neutral or negative.



N.B. There were 8 GP practices which we had no patient responses about: Collingwood Medical Group, Corbridge Medical Group, Elsdon Avenue Surgery, Infirmary Drive Medical Group, Laburnum Medical Group, Scots Gap Medical Group, The Bellingham Practice and The Gables Medical Group.

The responses received offer a snapshot of patients' experiences of accessing GP appointments in Northumberland. This being the case, we did not collect demographic information from patients therefore a breakdown of respondents by demographic characteristics is not available.

### **GP Practice Questionnaire**

All but one GP practice completed the survey giving us a total of 43 responses.

## **Survey Findings**

### **GP Practice Responses**

#### **1.) If a patient rang the practice now asking for an appointment, when is the next available one?**

When asked when the next available appointment is, 14 practices indicated that appointments were available that day and 10 said the next working day/tomorrow. In contrast, the next available (routine) appointment for 13 practices was within a week and for 4 practices it was more than one week. Please note, however, for many responses it was unclear whether answers concerned the availability of urgent/emergency or routine appointments, whereas others specifically indicated this. With that said, a large proportion of practices commented that patients would be able to get an appointment the same day if it was urgent.

#### **2.) If a patient asked to see a particular GP, how long would it be until they could get an appointment?**

The majority of GP practices found it difficult to provide definitive timescales for how long a patient would have to wait for an appointment with a particular GP. This was because the availability of appointments with specific GPs varies day-to-day and is dependent on a multitude of factors including:

- GP's working patterns - full-time or part-time/number of sessions per week
- Annual leave
- Staff illness/sick leave
- Patient availability
- Sex of the GP
- Popularity of GP
- Appointment cancellation

For those that did indicate how long it would be for an appointment with a specific GP, responses varied dramatically by practice as well as for specific GPs - it could be same day, a couple of days, a week or in some cases even a month's wait.

#### **3.) Do patients have to ring for an appointment at a specified time?**

When asked whether patients need to ring up for an appointment at a specified time, 33 said no, 6 said yes and 4 skipped the question (but many provided a written response).

Those that answered "yes" explained that this depends on several factors including what type of appointment is being requested (e.g. urgent, routine or home visit) as

well as when the appointment was needed (AM or PM). Some patients are required to call before or after a certain time, whereas other practices told us they “release” their appointments at a specified time. A few commented that they also give patients the option to book appointments online. Examples of responses include:

- *We request all Home Visits before 10:00 and Routine after 12:00 to allow those who request same day assistance the opportunity to contact the Surgery and disperse the telephone traffic throughout the day.*
- *We have same day appointments available each day that are released at 8.30am for AM and 11.30am for PM.*
- *At the moment, it's 9.30am. However this is being reviewed - possibility of more time in day or may release appointments previous afternoon.*
- *9am or 3pm, unless urgent. Answer machine explains new system. Can also book appointments in advance.*
- *Appointments are released at 8am every day.*
- *We encourage people to book online or to phone at 8.30am.*
- *Any time for routine appointments but for urgent must call at 8.30am or 12pm.*
- *Only for urgent same day appointments - 8am.*
- *We encourage people to book online*
- *Also, patients an book online*

#### **4.) Does the practice use telephone triage?**

22 practices said that they do not use telephone triage compared to 11 practices which indicated that they do use this. In these cases, triage is usually undertaken by a duty GP or on call GP, and occasionally by nurse practitioners. Often reception staff may gather some initial information from the patient before a more thorough triage is conducted by the GP to decide whether the patient needs to come in for an appointment, and if so, what type/when.

The other 10 practices explained that they *sometimes* use triage but don't do it formally (e.g. *if it is necessary and yes, at times - GP*). Others explained how it can be used flexibly for the benefit of patients, for example, when the demand for appointments is high and for urgent appointments:

- *If urgent or minor ailments or as overflow. GP does it but receptionist tries to get as much info as possible.*
- *Once appointments are gone then can do telephone triage for acute service - done by GP.*
- *Not generally but if demand for urgent appointments is greater than the number of urgent slots then triage is used. Duty doctor would do this.*
- *No, unless urgent.*

A few mentioned that they can call patients back or offer them telephone consultations:

- *No, we don't offer formal telephone triage but will phone patients back if they request. Some triage on call and do offer telephone advice.*

- *No, but we do offer, which are very popular, telephone consultations.*
- *The Practice offered specialist Nurse Triage however due to the amount of time taken to assess the request and then the difference in information given to actual symptoms on examination this was stopped as it was felt the clinical time could be better utilised. Clerical staff now ask for some information on the type of problem to help direct the patient to the most appropriate service/clinician. GP's have dedicated telephone advice sessions for those patients who have medical concerns and or questions and do now wish to be seen.*

### **5.) Do they offer telephone call back by a GP?**

When practices were asked if they offer telephone call back by a GP, 29 answered "yes", 1 said "no" and the remaining 13 did not answer this question. For those who answered "yes", there was a range of reasons for this including: triaging, urgent and same day requests, for certain reasons/appointments (e.g. medicine reviews), telephone advice for those who don't need/want an appointment or offered for non-urgent cases.

A few practices elaborated on this in terms of the number of daily telephone consultations typically offered. For example, one practice explained "*we have daily telephone consultations. For every surgery, usually have 3 in morning 2 in afternoon but can do more if necessary - very flexible*". Another practice told us they offer "*9 telephone slots a day*" compared to another which said they "*do around 200 telephone consultations per week but this varies in number from Monday to Friday*".

Of those who did not specify yes or no, their answers were similar to those above, for example:

- *We do offer patients a call back from a GP as an alternative to a same day appointment or home visit if appropriate.*
- *Do not triage but if a patient states they do not want an appointment but just wants to speak to GP then would be booked as a "GP advice" slot.*
- *We do however offer telephone appointments (both timed pre-bookable and untimed which are added to the end of a surgery). So patients can request a call from a specific GP at a time that suits them, or get a call from a specific or any GP the same day but the time will usually be within a 2 hour window.*
- *Call back can be offered but is at the discretion of the Duty doctor*

### **6.) If the GP calls the patient back, can they tell us how many enquiries are resolved this way?**

Given the range of reasons listed above for the use of telephone calls backs and the varying extent to which it is offered consistently, many GP practices found it difficult to indicate how many 'enquiries' are resolved this way. Thus the responses gathered from this question were largely inconclusive, especially since few practices have a system in place to measure and monitor/audit this information. Furthermore, the ways in which "resolved" appeared to be defined

varied. To demonstrate the extent to which responses to this question varied, some of them are listed below:

- *The majority of patients can have their problem resolved although occasionally it is evident that an appointment and or home visit is more appropriate and that will be accommodated.*
- *No audit done, but majority*
- *Variable*
- *Hopefully all of them but GP will ask patient to come in if they deem this necessary.*
- *About 50-70%*
- *3 out of 4 (75%) can't be resolved over the phone.*
- *All enquiries will be resolved resulting in either advice, face to face appointment or treatment etc*
- *Most - but impossible to say as every day is different.*
- *Most calls are resolved this way.*
- *It would depend on why patient is calling GP.*
- *Most - approx. 70%*
- *All are resolved.*
- *Don't know*
- *Varies hugely from day to day - will depend on what the patient rang about. Patient will be given appointment if required. Looking back over last month - daily telephone call list varies between 5 - 20 calls per day.*
- *100% - because they only book telephone appointments for things that can be resolved this way - i.e. repeat sick notes, medication reviews etc.*
- *No idea but if the patient has requested a call back then I would expect most queries to be resolved*

**7.) If the GP calls the patient back, can they tell us how many enquiries require a GP appointment?**

Aforementioned, several practices were unable to provide this information as it is not always accurately monitored (e.g. *“No audit done, but approx. 10%”, “No data available to provide this information”, “Don't have any figures” and “No analysis available”*).

Some practices indicated that a relatively small proportion of calls lead to a face-to-face GP appointment, and some gave estimates:

- *1 in 4*
- *About 30-50%*
- *We estimate that around two thirds of these do not need a face to face appointment*
- *Again, it depends - as a snapshot, today the duty GP rang 4 patients and 2 were made into an appointment.*
- *Depends however in general few.*
- *Around 30-35%*
- *Conversion rate of telephone to face-to-face appointments is 30%.*
- *Again will vary from day to day - say 20%*

- *Usually very few, only those for home visits.*

In many cases this was due to the nature of reason for calling back a patient:

- *No idea but I would expect the number to be small as the GP will generally only call the patient if they expect it is an issue that can be resolved over the phone.*
- *None, as all dealt with at the time due to nature of appointments.*
- *Depends, if they are routine follow up phone calls then generally no appointment is needed. If they are calls made because they wanted an appointment they'll often end up being seen.*
- *Difficult to tell as some patients don't want to physically come in*
- *It varies - if GP can sort out over the phone they will, but around half may be asked to come to the surgery.*

**8.) If the practice can offer appointments if it is “urgent”, how do they define urgent?**

Practices highlighted that definitions of “urgency” can be very subjective. A large proportion of practices indicated they take a ‘patient led’ approach whereby the patient fully decides whether their appointment request is urgent (in that they need to be seen the same day and/or it can’t wait until next routine appointment). For example:

- *Let patient decide themselves - will not turn anyone away.*
- *Defined by patients - asked if it can't wait but leave the ball in their court. Urgency is obviously subjective.*
- *Appointments are given as urgent if the patient says it is.*
- *Patient's definition, i.e. not queried*
- *Patient defines urgent... leave it to the patient to decide if they need to be seen the same day*
- *When patient specifies it is urgent*
- *Up to patient to define*
- *If patient tells us it is urgent, we treat it as urgent.*

However, in several practices, when a patient initially identifies their appointment need as ‘urgent’, it then goes to the GP to make the final decision. It varies between practices whether or not the reception staff request the patient’s reason for needing an appointment, but in most cases we were told that disclosing further information is voluntary:

- *If patients says it is urgent, then we would accept this and then for GP to decide.*
- *Down to patient - they decide if it's urgent but we ask the reason why and then the GP deals with it.*
- *The GP defines something as urgent. Reception staff given basic training - e.g. chest pains etc. Would always have someone to refer to though.*
- *Receptionists would ask to find out as much info as possible to put on GP screen who would decide.*
- *GP decides if patient needs to be seen or not.*

- *Patient defines in the first instance - then doctor via triage system.*
- *The staff ask the patient if it is urgent. If they say 'yes', the patient is asked if they would mind telling the staff why. The staff then make the decision how urgent and, if they can't, they ask the doctor. If the patient doesn't wish to tell the staff, they are put in to an urgent appointment slot anyway.*
- *Receptionist may ask for more information about symptoms - if patient unwilling to provide information the appointment will be booked and marked "patient said urgent". GP may book urgent appointment following call back to patient. If all urgent appointments are booked and patient needs to be seen additional appointments will be created.*

A couple of practices elaborated on the methods/systems they use in order to define "urgent", such as Doctor First or Navigator. These methods involve being able to differentiate between urgent and non-urgent appointment requests. For example:

- *The Practice uses GP First appointment system. All requests are dealt with on the day, however all reception staff are trained to recognise urgent calls and our procedure is to highlight these calls in a different colour on the doctors screen, we then send a separate immediate screen message to the doctor to inform them an urgent call has arrived. The doctor will then return a call more promptly.*
- *Receptionist does this using Navigator - followed by GP co-ordinator for the day. Receptionist will be asked what the appointment is for and then use Navigator (flowchart) to identify type of appointment needed (face to face or telephone) and who with - have an express nurse clinic with a highly skilled nurse practitioner - 2 nurse practitioners - GPs with different specialisms.*

Some practices also use 'red flags' to recognise patients with increased risk (e.g. *under 5s, palliative and other vulnerable patients*).

Interestingly, a few practices explained that patients who use urgent appointments inappropriately are subsequently advised of this:

- *If the GP later deems this an inappropriate use of an urgent appointment then the patient will be advised accordingly for future reference.*
- *If GP decides during consultation it is not urgent, they will tell the patient.*

## **9.) Does the practice signpost patients to other services or support, such as pharmacies?**

33 GP practices indicated that they do signpost patients to other services or support (e.g. pharmacies). However, the extent to which this is consistently done varies considerably between practices (e.g. *if necessary, occasionally, where appropriate, when required*) and is done through a range of methods such as over the phone, by posters and leaflets, on TV monitors, during consultations and on their websites.

Signposting to pharmacies was fairly common, particularly for GP practices with on-site pharmacists:

- *The practice currently has a pharmacist on site. Patients are able to make appointments to discuss their medication*
- *Pharmacist is in twice a week. Patients can discuss issues*
- *We have a clinical pharmacist on site*

A few practices also explained that they may also refer patients to A&E, minor injury units, access centres and/or specific clinics. However, some commented that they were unable to do this:

- *We do not send people to A&E unless clinically indicated (e.g. query fracture). We have no local walk-in centre so do not have the ability to refer to such*
- *Unfortunately we have a huge ongoing problem with our local pharmacy who would be unable at present to manage this*
- *If possible, yes but we do not expect admin staff to ask why the patient needs to be seen*
- *Reception staff are not qualified to do this*

In contrast, some practices said that most patients wish to be seen at the practice by a GP and that the majority of signposting would be done by the GP:

- *Not really. If patient contacts us, they generally want to see a clinician*
- *Not really, we are usually able to deal with problem in the practice*
- *The practice usually takes full responsibility*
- *In general no - patients are seen at the practice.*
- *GPs do this during appointment*
- *GP would if necessary.*

Other practices signpost patients to other services due to capacity demands:

- *If very busy they inform patients about access centre at Wansbeck.*
- *Not generally but if patients aren't happy with the appointments offered we will advise them of the nearest WIC [walk-in centre]*
- *Referred to access centre if full, patient can't make appointment times or they think it's urgent when it's not. But patients don't like going here*

#### **10.) When patients have an appointment, how long do they usually wait before the GP can see them?**

Almost every practice was unable to give an accurate and definitive answer for this question; the length of time patients wait to be seen for their appointment is dependent on a range of factors including: the GP, previous patients, 'did not attends' (DNAs) and unforeseen emergencies. For example:

- *This is caused in the main by an earlier patient requiring and receiving a bit more time than may have been originally planned for.*
- *Depends upon the GP - some are very strict with how long appointments last, others not as strict so has a knock on effect for people waiting.*
- *There were 11 DNAs on Monday, some of which were double appointments. This impacts upon appointment availability and delays.*

- *Majority of patients seen on time but if someone takes longer during their appointment, then can occasionally cause delays.*
- *Depends - some [GPs] tend to run later than others*
- *Female GPs tend to be delayed longer than males*
- *Depends upon the GP - some are very strict with how long appointments last, others not as strict so has a knock on effect for people waiting.*
- *Usually on time unless GP has to deal with an emergency.*
- *Depends which GP - most patients know which doctors tend to run later and are ok with this.*

With that said, the typical wait for appointments was approximately 0-15 minutes, with waits of up to 30 minutes being described as unusual. A few practices also explained that they inform patients of delays and offer booking another appointment if necessary.

## Patient Survey Responses

### 1.) How did you book your appointment? (135 completed, 1 skipped)

The most frequently used method of booking GP appointments was by telephone (73%), followed by in person (18%) and online (9%).

### 2.) Did you want to book your appointment with a named GP or any GP? (128 completed, 8 skipped)

Half of patients (50%) wanted to book an appointment with a named GP.

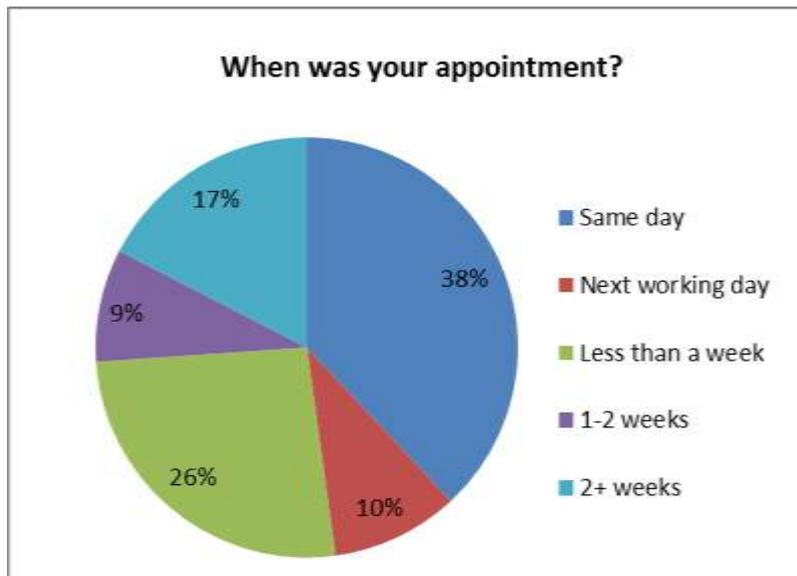
### 3.) Was your appointment with a named GP or any GP? (121 completed, 15 skipped)

Of the patients who wanted to see a named GP (64 patients), 81% told us they were given an appointment with a named GP.

### 4.) When did you book your appointment and when was your appointment? (92 completed, 44 skipped)

From these two questions, we were able to tell how long patients had to wait for an appointment. For ease of analysis, these were grouped into the following categories: “same day”, “next working day”, “less than one week”, “1-2 weeks” and “2+ weeks”. Of those who provided answers to both of these questions (92 respondents), 38% told us they were given an appointment the same day, 10% got an appointment for the next working day, 26% waited less than 1 week for an appointment, 9% waited between one and two weeks and 17% waited longer than 2 weeks for an appointment.

It is noteworthy, however, that approximately a third of respondents did not/were unable to provide specific dates from memory.



**5.) Did you have to ring for an appointment at a specified time? (131 completed, 5 skipped) If yes, please give details.**

31% of respondents said they had to phone for an appointment at a specified time. In these cases, most patients told us that when trying to secure an appointment they have to phone early in the morning (e.g. 8am, 8.30am, 9am or 9.30am). Others indicated that appointments were released in the afternoon (e.g. 12pm, 12.30pm, 2pm).

Some comments indicated that patients who worked struggled to call at the specified time. Several patients also had difficulties getting through on the telephone and described how appointments can go quickly in a short space of time. In some cases, patients were advised to call back the same time the next day and had to repeat this process several days in a row before successfully securing an appointment. For example:

- *You have to constantly ring from bang on 8.30am until they answer which can be over 40 minutes before you can get through [Seaton Park Medical Group]*
- *Appointments are released at 12pm every day, getting through is very hard and if you ring at 12.20pm you may not get an appointment. I work so find it hard to get a phone to ring at 12pm [Lintonville Medical Group]*
- *Had to ring from 9.30 am but took till 11am when all appointments were taken, told to ring back the following day this went on for 3 days [Seaton Park Medical Group]*
- *8am to ensure I was seen that day [Well Close Medical Group]*
- *After 12 noon - line busy for 15 mins - then queue [Lintonville Medical Group]*
- *No appointments were available to book in the days following, I was told to ring first thing in the morning to make one for that day [Cramlington Medical Group]*

- *No appointment was available on the day I rang and was told to ring back the following morning at 08:30am when the next day's appointments would be released [Bedlingtonshire Medical Group]*
- *I tried around 10.00 but line constantly engaged tried again at 11.30 and got through after about 3 minutes wait [Bedlingtonshire Medical Group]*
- *Couldn't call until after 9am. I'm at work then, so often can't phone, so now rarely access my GP services [Seaton Park Medical Group]*

Some feedback from this question is at odds with the responses provided by practices (12 practices who said patients do not have to call at a specified time received comments from patients saying they did have to call at a specific time to book their appointment). However, in a handful of cases this was due to patient's own requirements (e.g. working hours) rather than the practices.

Furthermore, we also identified some discrepancies with regards to online advice about when patients must call to book an appointment. For example, a few practices said patients do not have to call at a specified time but online they advised of 'peak times' and highlighted how quickly appointments may be taken:

- *To make an appointment either call in at the surgery or telephone during opening hours...the telephone lines and staff will be most busy during the morning hours 8.00-10.00am so please try to avoid ringing the surgery at these times if you can*
- *Appointments can be made by calling at the surgery or telephoning during opening hours. We make every effort to see patients the same day but you must ring early, appointments can go in 20 minutes.*

Others did not specify a time at all (e.g. "appointments can be booked in person, over the telephone or online", "to arrange appointments, please telephone the surgery on...") and some advised when the telephone lines are open from but did not specify when to call (e.g. "reception is open from 8.30am to book appointments for GPs or the Nurse led clinics", "telephone lines are open from 8.15am each weekday morning", "phone after 8.30am").

#### **6.) Were you asked why you needed your appointment? (132 completed, 4 skipped)**

45% of patients said they were asked why they needed an appointment.

#### **7.) Were you offered a call back by a GP? (128 completed, 8 skipped)**

Almost a quarter (23%) of patients told us they were offered a call back by a GP.

#### **8.) Did the practice ask if you needed an urgent appointment? If yes, was this defined? (130 completed, 6 skipped)**

30% of patients were asked if they needed an urgent appointment. Some patients indicated this was not defined, which some found to be problematic (e.g. "*I think this is an issue because what is urgent to one person is not to another. The patient is not always the best person to decide this*" and "*Difficulty is what constitutes an emergency in GP eyes*").

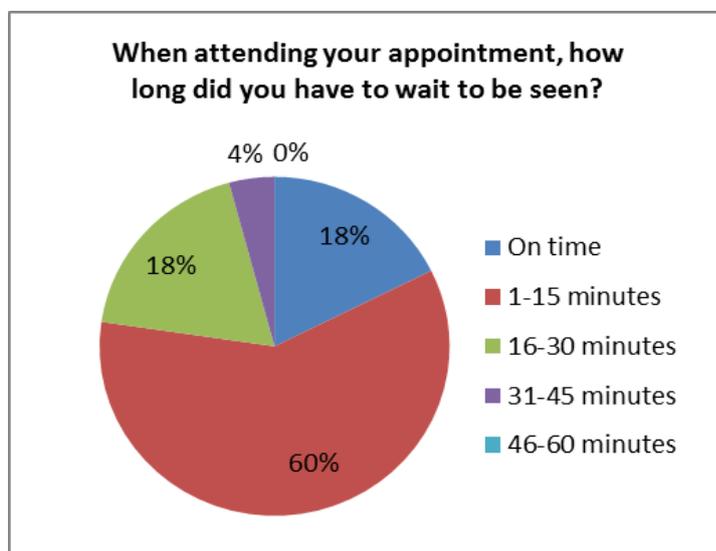
In some cases patients said they disclosed information about why they wanted an appointment in order to determine whether their situation was deemed 'urgent'/requiring a same day appointment:

- *I explained the need for the appointment at the outset and always do, be it for myself or my wife [Widdrington Surgery]*
- *Due to my condition and reason I was told this was not deemed an emergency [Seaton Park Medical Group]*
- *The 'navigation' process indicated that I needed an urgent appointment [Seaton Park Medical Group]*
- *They offered me an appointment the following week but after I explained the problem and asked which hospital I should visit instead, they arranged an appointment within 3 hours [Netherfield House Surgery]*
- *I told the girl on reception my problem [Glendale Surgery]*
- *I explained that this was a follow up and time constrained [Belford Medical Group]*

**9.) Were you signposted to another service, such as your local pharmacy? (127 completed, 9 skipped)**

Only 6% of patients said they were signposted to another service. This included services such as pharmacies, nurse practitioner, district nurse, talking therapy service and a website.

**10.) When attending your appointment, how long did you have to wait to be seen? (120 completed, 16 skipped)**



For ease of analysis, responses to this question were categorised into the following groups: seen on time, 1-15 minute wait, 16-30 minute wait, 31-45 minute wait and 46-60 minute wait. Approximately 1 in 5 (18%) respondents were seen on time for their appointment and a further 60% indicated they were seen for their appointment within 15 minutes. However, 18% of respondents waited 16-30 minutes to be seen and 4% waited 31-45 minutes. No respondents indicated they were waiting longer than 45 minutes.

## 11.) Do you have any other comments about your experience of accessing a GP appointment? (113 completed)

Respondents were given the opportunity to share any other feedback about their experiences of accessing GP appointments at their practices. The comments were analysed in terms of whether patients indicated if their experience was largely positive, neutral or negative - this breakdown is presented in Appendix 9. This feedback was also analysed in terms of any reoccurring themes (positive and negative) and whether it reflects other available sources of data. We anonymised some parts of comments to protect the confidentiality of patients to ensure they cannot be identified.

However, with regards to accessing GP appointments, the feedback provided was very mixed.

### Many patients are satisfied with their access to GP appointments:

- *Usually get an appointment within a couple of days, if urgent can go up and wait at the end of surgeries. They have a good system so no complaints* [Prudhoe Medical Group]
- *Usually get in fairly quickly* [Glendale Surgery]
- *Usually given an appointment the same day* [Cheviot Medical Group]
- *Usually quite easy to get an appointment* [The Bondgate Surgery]
- *No problem getting appointments* [Haydon Bridge & Allendale Medical Practice]
- *I was able to get an appointment in a reasonable time frame* [The Adderlane Surgery]
- *I specifically requested an appointment after 5pm on a Friday evening and was given the next one. No problems!* [Haydon Bridge & Allendale Medical Practice]
- *Generally appointments are available and I find early morning/after work appointments too, which are ideal for me* [The Sele Medical Practice]
- *I don't think waiting times for appointments are unreasonable* [Gas House Lane Surgery]
- *Appointment was same day. Have no problems with same day appointments* [Branch End Surgery]
- *They are flexible in terms of booking appointments, online bookings, offering telephone consultations and are efficient once the appointment has been made* [Gas House Lane Surgery]
- *Able to get an appointment quickly* [Gas House Lane Surgery]
- *Adderlane operate a walk in service each morning which I find quite helpful. I have never experienced a problem being seen on the same day. Excellent service!* [The Adderlane Surgery]
- *Always brilliant. Can always get appointment within 48 hours - always same day if urgent!* [Burn Brae Medical Group]
- *If I ring first thing in the morning, it is usually possible to get an appointment the same day. I can agree in advance a follow-up phone appointment if necessary* [Haydon Bridge & Allendale Medical Practice]
- *Practice always keeps some slots for urgent appointments* [Glendale Surgery]

- *It's good you can get an appointment on the day [Seaton Park Medical Group]*
- *No problem with Felton Surgery to see named GP [Middle Farm Surgery]*
- *Happy to wait for a named GP [Greystoke Surgery]*
- *Have accessed twice in last 2 weeks and got an appointment the same day [Haltwhistle Medical Group]*

**However, unfortunately many more patients were dissatisfied with their access to GP appointments. Many of these comments related to difficulties booking an appointment:**

- *I haven't been able to make an appointment as every time I ring, the routine appointments are gone and I have to try again the next day. This has gone on sporadically for a few weeks now. Terrible system and terrible service [Lintonville Medical Group]*
- *My mother who has [a chronic health condition] could not get an appointment at all when she rang at one point. She explained what she needed the appointment for and was told she would be put on a waiting list for a cancellation and still never got an appointment. She was seen at the local hospital by the nurse who regularly checks her heart/bloods as she sorted her medication out [The Bondgate Surgery]*
- *The release of appointments is ridiculous; there are queues outside of the surgery to get appointments so if you happen to be ringing in quite often you are told that all of them have gone because they don't answer the phone until they have given out all of the apps to those standing in the surgery. The designated time for releasing appointments is not working but Lintonville refuse to admit this and change. That was for emergency appointment, routine appointments are just as bad, I once rang every day for seven weeks to try to book a routine app and in the end decided that it was just so bloody ridiculous and was sick of being told different information every time I rang that I asked for an emergency appointment and then got slated by the doctor for taking up an emergency appointment [Lintonville Medical Group]*
- *Not usually but sometimes it is difficult to get one on the day if it is something urgent [Greystoke Surgery]*
- *You can never get an appointment early you have to wait or ring back 8.30 - sometimes a doctor will ring you back [Station Medical Group]*
- *We have to call at 8am to get an appointment for that day. They don't release any other appointments for any other days [Well Close Medical Group]*
- *Today I have rang again as I need a follow up appointment, finally got through at 8.20am to be told that all appointments are gone for today and non other are available until 8am tomorrow [Well Close Medical Group]*
- *It is difficult to get an appointment when you need one. If you ring the surgery, you are told to ring back at 8am the next morning when they will give out appointments if possible [Well Close Medical Group]*
- *It can be difficult to get through on the phone at 8:30am and as I knew I needed to see someone I went to the surgery for it opening at 8:25am [Forum Family Practice]*
- *I had to ring a few times to speak to someone [Forum Family Practice]*

- As a carer...needing to travel by bus on bus timetables, it's not good and sometimes difficult to get appointment to suit buses [The Bondgate Surgery]

**Several comments also showed that some patients feel that there are unreasonable delays between requesting and receiving an appointment:**

- *Always have to wait a few weeks for an appointment. This was not very good as it was to discuss hospital test results and medication was required* [The Bondgate Surgery]
- *Difficulties in getting appointments in afternoons and having to wait 2 weeks or more for a pre-booked appointment otherwise no guarantee of getting an appointment with specified Dr by ringing first thing in a morning. Having done this on a number of occasions appointments are rarely available* [Guide Post Medical Group]
- *Often difficult to get an appointment. Often have to wait 3 weeks before GP available* [The Bondgate Surgery]
- *It seems impossible to see a "doctor" nowadays at GHL unless you are prepared to wait for over a week or more, which as a sufferer of [a chronic health condition] is not acceptable, the overall service at GHL has deteriorated significantly over recent years!* [Gas House Lane Surgery]
- *My family have found that it takes a long time to get an appointment even telephone appointments can take up to 3 weeks, getting a GP of your choice can take longer but we put it down to sign of the times* [Seaton Park Medical Group]
- *Takes longer than it should to get appointment than it should - often 1 week* [Haydon Bridge and Allendale Medical Practice]
- *The only problem my family find is you have to wait for an appointment maybe 2-3 weeks or even 4 weeks in advance, which really isn't ideal. Too many people with one practice, is a mistake waiting to happen* [Greystoke Surgery]
- *The quickest follow up appointment I could be offered was 3.5 weeks away. Surely there should be something sooner than having to wait nearly a month* [Well Close Medical Group]
- *Too long a wait* [The Sele Medical Practice]
- *Trying to get an appointment is very difficult more often than not having to wait 2 weeks to get a GP appointment although on this occasion it was only 4 days which was unusual for our practice* [Ponteland Medical Group]
- *Very hard to get an appointment in this practice, even with an unnamed GP. I have previously been told no appointments available for over 2 weeks* [The Bondgate Surgery]

**These difficulties were often exacerbated for patients who wanted to see a named/specific GP:**

- *You can never get the GP you want it is nearly always unknown names* [Widdrington Surgery]
- *In order to see a named GP (who was dealing with my concerns) my husband had to wait 4 weeks as he required an evening appointment* [Union Brae and Norham Practice]
- *Lack of female GP available* [Well Close Medical Group]

- *I have a designated doctor who I regularly am unable to see as he fails to put his dates into reception [Widdrington Surgery]*
- *I wanted to talk to a doctor (not a nurse practitioner) [Ponteland Medical Group]*
- *Do have to wait longer when want to see a specific GP [Haltwhistle Medical Group]*

**In addition to this, there were numerous comments about specific appointment booking systems/procedures. Some patients saw the benefits of the appointment booking system used at their GP practice:**

- *The new appointment service is working excellently. Appointments with GP's are made on the day by the GP themselves which prevents unnecessary travel if the matter can simply be resolved with the GP via telephone conversation. I have always been able to get an appointment when needed [Brockwell Medical Group]*
- *I think the new system is great as you are able to get appointment same day if required [Wellway Medical Group]*
- *This system is good. Priority is GP assessing how urgent your appointment will be. Some patients may not like the new system and prefer to sit and wait in the health centre. Takes all sorts to keep happy [Wellway Medical Group]*
- *GP rang back after an hour. In this case, no need for face-to-face appointment. I had a telephone discussion with a GP. I had self-diagnosed, the GP agreed, given prescription. In this case, very satisfactory result [Rothbury Practice]*

**However, many more patients found their GP practices' appointment booking systems very frustrating and impractical:**

- *I saw a pharmacist first who advised me I needed to be seen by a GP. I could not make an appointment with a GP and had to wait for them to ring me back, it would have saved time if I could have just made the appointment as I had already been seen by a medical professional [Wellway Medical Group]*
- *I do not see why I have to wait till 12pm to ring and ask for an appointment. I should be able to call at 830-9am and make an appointment. Also when you phone for a doctor's appointment there are also people queuing to make appointments in the practice it's like a lottery [Lintonville Medical Group]*
- *Difficulty is what constitutes an emergency in GP eyes [Seaton Park Medical Group]*
- *Things like my sons weigh check I feel it is a waste of the GPs time to have to ring me first when he has to be seen to get weighed so sometimes the system is a bit extreme and wastes GPs time [Wellway Medical Group]*
- *Don't like being assessed first by doctor, just adds to delay if you know you urgently need to see a GP [Wellway Medical Group]*
- *You should be able to book in advance rather than everyone having to ring at the same time and anyone needing an appointment that day has to take their chance. I visit the GP very rarely and on a previous occasion I rang after 12 and was told there were no appointments left and I would have to*

*ring again after 12 the next day. This was for an appointment the Doctor had asked me to make [Lintonville Medical Group]*

- *Doctor first system doesn't offer continuity with GPs so you continually have to repeat symptoms, history etc [Wellway Medical Group]*
- *Telephone service needs updating urgently, as at busy times phones constantly engaged and does not catch data on how many calls do not get through [Bedlintonshire Medical Group]*

**Problems associated with these specific appointment booking systems were particularly problematic for patients who work. Some working patients also commented on the opening hours of their practice and appointment availability outside of typical working hours:**

- *My GP has recently changed its appointment system, can't book an appointment in advance you have to ring up on the day speak to a doctor first then maybe get an appointment for the same day! I work full time, I can't just take phone calls and walk out of work if I get an appointment, my employer has to know in advance so they can get cover [Brockwell Medical Group]*
- *I didn't take an appointment as the system is that you ask for an appointment. A GP must then ring you back at some point in the day and assess whether an appointment is needed. This could be at any point in the day. However I work and cannot take calls. It's a ridiculous system that discriminates against people who work. I don't get paid for taking time off and simply cannot afford to hang around and wait for them. Many people cannot have a phone with them in working hours (e.g. those in shops, schools and call centres like me). How are we supposed to access the service? [Brockwell Medical Group]*
- *There is still a strange system of releasing appointments at certain times which isn't very helpful if you need to book an appointment to fit around work or childcare [Bedlintonshire Medical Group]*
- *I rang at 8.40am on [day] as I couldn't ring at 8am, as I'm at work and that is our busiest time. I was told there were no appointments left. So I rang 36 times between 8am and 8.13am on [next day] before my call was answered [Well Close Medical Group]*
- *They say ring back at 8 the following day but for people who work that is not possible [Well Close Medical Group]*
- *It's a nightmare and gets me very stressed. I have to ring on the day, a GP rings me back and I'm supposed to be given an appointment that day. But I work full time and it's very difficult for me to make/take private phone calls at work. And it's also very difficult to make an appointment the same day, when I'm actually at work that day and can't just leave [Wellway Medical Group]*
- *It is a horrendous service, you have to ring the surgery, explain why you would like to speak to a GP, though have the option not to. A GP will ring back within a time frame (given at that point) which is inappropriate if you work, to then give you an appointment later that day [Wellway Medical Group]*
- *In this surgery you cannot book any appointment. Doctor first means you have to ring and leave a message with a receptionist and then wait for the*

*doctor to call you back and decide when/if you can be seen. I work and can't take calls at work [Wellway Medical Group]*

- *If you book online, the process is easy, but appointments are scarce and can be difficult to juggle work, especially when you don't work near your home [Well Close Medical Group]*
- *It can be difficult to access a GP appointment at a time that is convenient i.e. fitting around work commitments, this becomes even more problematic if you want to see a named GP [The Bondgate Surgery]*
- *I had to lose a bit time from work to attend my appointment [Cramlington Medical Group]*
- *Limited open hours, wanted an appointment before 9am or after 5pm [Marine Medical Group]*
- *Need more appointments before 9 and after 5 [Middle Farm Surgery]*

**Several patients commented on booking appointments online (and in some cases how this compares to booking appointments by telephone), however, experiences were mixed:**

- *I tried to book online but no appointments were available, so rang and got one for the next day [The Bondgate Surgery]*
- *They are flexible in terms of booking appointments, online bookings, offering telephone consultations [The Gas House Lane Surgery]*
- *I use online most of the time, however it is often difficult to be online at that particular time when appointments are released because if you aren't online, there are no appointments to be had [Lintonville Medical Group]*
- *Marine have always offered a good service and I do use the online appointment system [Marine Medical Group]*
- *Using the online process means making appointments is easy and convenient [Prudhoe Medical Group]*
- *Appreciate being able to book online [Riversdale Surgery]*
- *Easy to book online for a non-urgent appointment [Rothbury Practice]*
- *I prefer to book online if possible as I find having to ring at 8 am difficult and you are always held in a queue. Ringing at other times does not always bring about an appointment, even booking ahead [Well Close Medical Group]*
- *It is difficult to get an appointment when you need one. If you ring the surgery, you are told to ring back at 8am the next morning when they will give out appointments if possible. If you book online, the process is easy, but appointments are scarce and can be difficult to juggle work, especially when you don't work near your home. When I saw my GP the last time, it took a while to determine why I was there and in the end, I was told I would be referred to Physio as they didn't know what was wrong with me [Well Close Medical Group]*
- *On line appointments are very few available [Bedlingtonshire Medical Group]*
- *The online system is excellent and means I can actually get an appointment. I found prior to this, the telephone was rarely answered quickly and took up to much time if engaged [White Medical Group]*
- *Would be nice to book on line in diary system*

With regards to staff attitudes, many patients commented that they feel they are not treated with respect. Further to this, some highlighted that they do not feel comfortable disclosing information to reception staff and do not understand the reason for this:

- *I feel 'interrogated' by the receptionist and I dread phoning. I get more stressed and upset about phoning than I do about the appointment [Wellway Medical Group]*
- *This surgery needs a whole change of reception staff and to tell their staff that they don't need to know anything as to why I want an appointment, they are there to make appointments not find out my health history and try to diagnose me themselves over the phone [Lintonville Medical Group]*
- *Reception staff are rude and indignant and seem to feel that they need to know everything about you before they will give you an appointment. I got the third degree from the receptionists, I was told I had to get to the surgery to see a doctor, I couldn't speak to one on the phone, they said they would pass on my message and a doctor would ring back, when I rang back the following day they didn't even have any record of my phone call [Lintonville Medical Group]*
- *I also do not like being asked by the receptionist why I need to see the GP it has nothing to do with them it is confidential, they are not medically trained and do not need to know what is wrong with me [Lintonville Medical Group]*
- *Sometimes the receptionists can be very abrupt and not very caring. However this lady was quite pleasant [Marine Medical Group]*
- *I told the receptionist the problem but I still felt fobbed off [Cramlington Medical Group]*
- *The receptionists treat you with contempt as though you are being a nuisance asking for an appointment [Well Close Medical Group]*
- *Made to feel it's too much trouble [Bedlingtonshire Medical Group]*
- *You have to struggle with the receptionist sometimes to get an appointment [Greystoke Surgery]*

Lastly, some patients even commented that as a result of their dissatisfaction with the service they avoid visiting their GP practice/making appointments. In some cases patients are using alternative services or not seeking medical help.

- *I have health needs which I am ignoring because of this system. The surgery will have no idea of how many people are put off by their system [Wellway Medical Group]*
- *I didn't take an appointment as the system is that you ask for an appointment [Brockwell Medical Group]*
- *I have pretty much given up with the GP practice and attend walk in centres when I need to see a GP [Forum Family Practice]*
- *I find I avoid going due to the appointment process; I have had successful call backs from GPs but a few months ago when I needed medication advice the GP chastised me for having an urgent call back, despite the fact that I'd told the reception that I would have been happy to speak to a nurse or a doctor and at no time did I say it was urgent, though I was experiencing a lot of discomfort [Seaton Park Medical Group]*

- *On this occasion the system worked as I waited until after 'rush-hour' before ringing and the operator followed navigation. However, I have over the last few months not bothered because of frustration in trying to get through and in trying to get an appointment [Seaton Park Medical Group]*

Evidently, both the quantitative and qualitative feedback obtained from this project is, at times, very mixed; whilst there is a larger proportion of negative feedback, there is considerable variation in the positivity of comments both between and even within practices. This variance and the themes discussed above are also reflected in other data (e.g. NHS Choices reviews, Healthwatch Northumberland comments and CCG Patient Forum event feedback), supporting the key findings and conclusions of this project. Due to repetition, however, this additional data is presented within the Appendices.

### **Blyth Acute Service (Pilot Site) - Drop in sessions**

This site was chosen for our drop-in sessions as it is currently piloting a new model of delivering primary care. The service aims to deal with the increasing number of on the day or emergency problems and is available to patients who are registered at either Station Medical Group or Waterloo Medical Group. The system requires that each patient contacts their own practice for an appointment. If the patient identifies their need as urgent, they are referred to the duty doctor from the Acute Service who triages them, to confirm if their situation is classed as an emergency or urgent, so that those with the greatest need are seen the same day. They are then given an appointment at the centre usually within a short period of time after being triaged. Patients will be seen by an on-duty GP from either practice or an on-duty experienced practice nurse. This service is available from 8.30am - 6.30pm, five days a week (Monday to Friday).

In February 2016, we held 2 x half day drop-in sessions at Blyth Acute Service (within Blyth Community Hospital) to find out whether patients' experience of accessing appointments had improved now they had access to this model of care. A total of 46 patients completed our short questionnaire.

Overall, the feedback received was very positive:

- 93% of people asked described the service as either “very useful” or “useful”
- 72% described it as “better” than the service they had from their GP practice before.
- Themes from comments typically concerned:
  - **The speed and ease of getting an appointment:**
    - *Got through this morning very quickly*
    - *Can get in straight away*
    - *Quick to ring back*
    - *Quick and easy.*
  - **Difficulties accessing an appointment at their GP practice:**
    - *Can see a doctor straightaway rather than wait a week*
    - *Because you can never get into the doctors*
    - *Because in past have to keep ringing back to get appointment each day*

- *More chances to be seen-can fit more people in*
- *Easier to get to see a doctor, beforehand sometimes had to wait 3 or 4 days when it was something urgent/important*
- **Enhanced experience for working patients and patients with children:**
  - *Just easier-especially as work full-time-can't get time off*
  - *You can phone in the morning and get appointment same day especially with a young baby*
- **Patients no longer using other health services:**
  - *If I couldn't get in here I would have had to travel all the way to Wansbeck General Hospital*
  - *Probably would have gone to A&E if I had not been able to get here straight away*
- However, some patients raised issues associated with getting through by telephone:
  - *By the time you phone at 8.30 cannot get through*
  - *Had to make 65 calls since 8.30am to get through to the practice initially. After 9.05am before got through*
  - *Other than having to keep ringing in - better*
  - *By the time you phone at 8.30 cannot get through*

## What works well for patients?

Patient experience is one of the five domains which make up the NHS Outcomes Framework (see Appendix 6). It is also recognised as one of the three dimensions of quality outlined in Lord Darzi's 2008 NHS Next Stage Review (in addition to clinical effectiveness and patient safety).

A report by the King's Fund, "Improving GP Services in England", found evidence to suggest that practices that perform well on patient satisfaction/experience measures generally perform better in terms of clinical outcomes (measured by the Quality and Outcomes Framework). The report suggested that improving patients' experiences of booking and accessing GP appointments will likely lead to better overall patient satisfaction as well as better uptake of and interaction with services - this can ultimately affect patients' quality of care and health outcomes.

This highlights the value of listening to patients; feedback should be of upmost interest to those providing and planning services. However, feedback from this project clearly demonstrates that accessing GP appointments should be flexible as one size doesn't fit all. It is evident from feedback from patients that the following aspects relating to GP appointments are important to them:

- **Receiving an appointment in a timely manner** (e.g. *"getting an appointment was easy, even at short notice"*).
- **Being seen promptly for an appointment** (e.g. *"appointment was on time and the doctor was nice and spoke to me"*, *"the appointment was on time so I wasn't waiting longer than I had to"*).
- **Being able to book routine appointments in advance** (e.g. *"you can't make an appointment in advanced for follow up appointments"*).

- **Having the option to make an appointment through a range of flexible methods** (e.g. *“I am very satisfied with the way my GP operates, especially so after the surgery started releasing appointments electronically”*, *“so much better now I can order my repeat prescription online and for booking appointments”*, *“the newly adopted telephone calls with doctors has enabled easier access to a doctor’s appointment”*).
- **Having their call handled quickly and efficiently** (e.g. *“easy to get an appointment”*, *“you have to constantly ring from bang on 8.30am until they answer”*, *“Sometimes the receptionists can be very abrupt and not very caring”*).
- **Having an appointment at a time which is convenient for them** (e.g. *“I work full time, I can’t just take phone calls and walk out of work if I get an appointment”*, *“just easier-especially as work full-time-can’t get time off”*, *“need more appointments before 9 and after 5”*).
- **And in some cases, having their appointment with a specific GP** (e.g. *“I liked that I always get the same doctor who knows who I am and my exact medical history”*, *“I liked that I got to see the GP who I usually see”*).

Some of these positive approaches to accessing GP appointments (and others) have also been identified from other sources of information and could be considered as good practice. For example, CQC inspection reports for GP practices in Northumberland have also highlighted positive instances relating to accessing appointments such as offering patients appointments outside of school hours as well as offering extended opening hours for patients who work (both before and after usual opening times), having pre-bookable appointments which can be arranged several weeks in advance and promoting the availability of telephone consultations/advice. See Appendix 7 for more examples and information.

It is also important that patients receive appropriate, accurate and consistent information from their GP practice with regards to accessing GP appointments. By carrying out some desktop research, we identified some examples of good online information provision on practice websites including: explaining different ways of booking appointments (e.g. phone, online and in person), when this can be/should be done and information about triaging methods (if applicable) and their aims/benefits. It is essential that this information is equally available to patients without internet access. See Appendix 9 for more examples and information.

## Conclusions

PACS Vanguard offers an opportunity to show that service providers and commissioners really value the views of patients and that they want to ensure their experiences of health and social care truly inform how services are planned and delivered in the new model of care to meet patient needs.

We have received mixed feedback from patients through this project, both between and within practices indicating that what works well for one patient (or practice), may not for another. This has also been reflected in other sources of data (e.g. NHS choices, Healthwatch Northumberland feedback), thus supporting the conclusions and recommendations of this report. However, further targeted

engagement work would be useful to inform the development of PACS in Northumberland, such as with patients who work.

Many patients have expressed that they are happy with access to GP appointments at their practice; numerous patients have little difficulty booking appointments, receive an appointment within an acceptable timescale and/or do not wait long to be seen for their appointment. More specifically, when considering the development of PACS, experiences of patients accessing support through the 'hub' model has been largely positive and provides support for this way of delivering primary care. This model of increasing access to same day/urgent appointments should allow GPs more time to consult with and meet the needs of patients who have more complex health conditions and may mean that some patients will stop using services inappropriately (e.g. A&E)/avoid seeking any medical attention at all.

However, from this project, we have also identified a number of areas in which improvements are required:

- Whilst certain appointment booking systems work well for some patients, they are not valued by others - one size does not fit all. For example, some groups of patients (particularly those who work) find certain systems impractical and feel they do not have the same access to appointments as other patients. Systems must therefore offer some flexibility; this may include extended opening hours, encouraging the use of online booking, increasing the availability of advance routine appointments, telephone call backs at times agreed with patients and giving these patients priority over early or later appointments.
- Greater clarity is required with regards to what constitutes "urgent", particularly as some patients have been criticised for their inappropriate use of urgent appointments. Guidance given to patients would benefit both patients and the practice.
- In order to increase access to GP appointments, GP practices should ensure patients are proactively signposted to appropriate alternative services/health care professionals using a range of means. For this to be successful, some patients may require information from their GP practice about the roles of different health care professionals and what they are qualified to assist with (e.g. nurse practitioners, pharmacists).
- Many patients raised issues related to releasing appointments at specified time due to "rush hour" telephone traffic meaning the telephone lines are often engaged or calls go unanswered. In other cases, when patients do get to speak to a receptionist, all the appointments are taken and they are advised to call back at the same time the following day (this can sometimes go on for several days in a row). This appeared to be less of a problem at the Blyth Acute Service, although some patients did tell us they struggled to get through by telephone.

- Some patients feel reception staff act as ‘gatekeepers’ to appointments and that they feel like a nuisance when they request one. Similarly, many patients feel uncomfortable disclosing information to them and do not understand the reasons for sharing this information with staff that are not medically trained. Some staff may require further support or training on how to handle calls and provide a good service for patients.
- Monitoring information with regards to the success of telephone call backs and whether they led to a face-to-face appointment would also be advantageous. Similarly, monitoring how many face-to-face appointments could have been resolved by telephone or by another health care professional (e.g. pharmacist) may also be beneficial in increasing access to GP appointments.

## Recommendations

- The findings of this project should be utilised along with other sources of patient engagement information and GP practice feedback to inform the development of PACS in order to increase access to primary care.
- GP practices and commissioners should continue to demonstrate, share and learn from examples of good practice to improve experiences for both patients and GP practices.
- Healthwatch Northumberland will continue to seek feedback from patients about their experiences of health and social care and share this regularly with service providers and commissioners so that they can continue to inform how services are planned and delivered across the county.

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## Appendix 1 - GP questionnaire



Accessing GP Appointments  
November 2015

### GP Practice Contact

Name of Practice \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Contact \_\_\_\_\_

Date contacted \_\_\_\_\_ Tel No \_\_\_\_\_

Introduce yourself, explain that you are ringing from Healthwatch Northumberland as part of a project we are working on around access to GPs. Ask if they can spare a few minutes to answer a few questions. If they say no, offer to send the questions by e-mail and ask for an e-mail address for a named person who can respond.

Did not wish to respond by phone. Email \_\_\_\_\_

If a patient rang the practice now asking for an appointment, when is the next available one?

If the patient asked to see a particular GP, how long would it be until they could get an appointment?

Do they have to ring for an appointment at a specified time?  yes  no

If yes, when?

Does the practice use telephone triage?  yes  no

If yes, who does it?

Do they offer telephone call back by a GP?  yes  no

If the GP calls the patient back, can they tell us how many enquiries are resolved this way?

If the GP calls the patient back, can they tell us how many enquiries require a GP appointment?

If the practice can offer appointments if it is 'urgent', how do they define 'urgent'?

Does the practice signpost patients to other services or support such as pharmacies?

When patients have an appointment, how long do they usually wait before the GP can see them?

## Appendix 2 - Patient questionnaire



Accessing GP Appointments  
November 2015

We are interested in finding out your experiences of accessing GP appointments. If you have recently visited or are planning to visit your GP in the next few weeks please fill out this questionnaire and return it to us after you attend your appointment.

Name of Practice: \_\_\_\_\_

Date appointment booked: \_\_\_\_\_ Your postcode: \_\_\_\_\_

How did you book your appointment?	<input type="checkbox"/> in person	<input type="checkbox"/> on the phone	<input type="checkbox"/> online
Did you want to book your appointment with:	<input type="checkbox"/> a named GP	<input type="checkbox"/> any GP	
Was your appointment booked with:	<input type="checkbox"/> a named GP	<input type="checkbox"/> any GP	
What date was your appointment?			
Did you have to ring for an appointment at a specified time?	<input type="checkbox"/> yes	<input type="checkbox"/> no	
If yes, please give details:			
Were you asked about why you needed an appointment?	<input type="checkbox"/> yes	<input type="checkbox"/> no	
Were you offered a call back by a GP?	<input type="checkbox"/> yes	<input type="checkbox"/> no	
Did the practice ask if you needed an urgent appointment?	<input type="checkbox"/> yes	<input type="checkbox"/> no	
If yes, was this defined?			
Were you signposted to another other service such as your local pharmacy?	<input type="checkbox"/> yes	<input type="checkbox"/> no	
If yes, where were you signposted to?			
When attending your appointment how long did you have to wait to be seen?			
Do you have any other comments about your experience of accessing a GP appointment?			

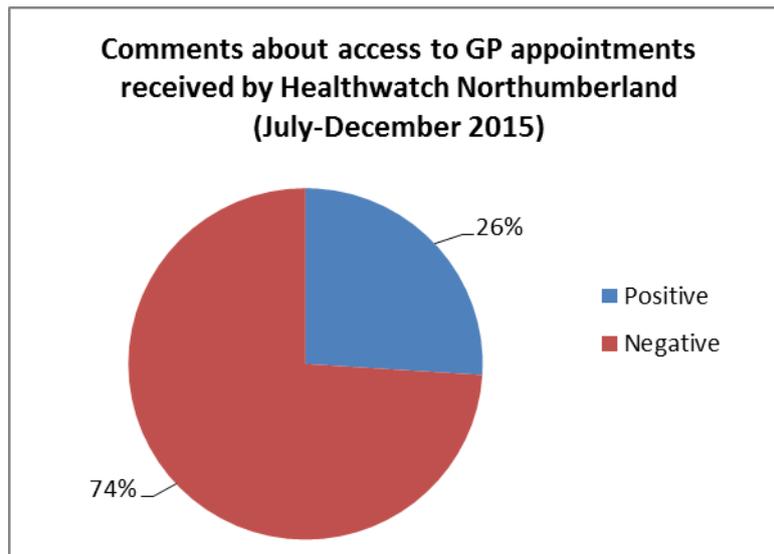
Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Please post it back to: Freepost RTLX-SYBA-UTAA  
Healthwatch Northumberland  
Adapt NE  
Bum Lane  
Hexham  
NE46 3HN

## Appendix 3 - Healthwatch Northumberland comments (July-December 2015)

### Comments received by Healthwatch Northumberland

Comments relating to GP practices received by Healthwatch Northumberland between July and December 2015 (6 months) were examined. In total, there were 550 comments about GP practices, of which 200 comments related specifically to accessing GP appointments. Of these 'access' comments, 26% were positive and 74% were negative.



Healthwatch Northumberland have identified some reoccurring themes relating to access to GP appointments including waiting times for appointments, appointment booking systems and whether patients are seen on time for their appointment. In most instances, there were examples of patients who had had good and poor experiences, however, unfortunately negative comments tended to outweigh the positive ones.

There were several comments where people had no issues in obtaining GP appointments (e.g. “got an appointment for the next day”, “Relatively quick to get an appointment (1-3 days)”, “I got an appointment quickly “, “getting an appointment was easy, even at short notice”, “can always get appointments with GP”, “good range of appointments”, “able to get appointment same day for children”, “have never encountered any problems when ringing to get an appointment, sometimes managing to get an appointment on the same day if not within a few days”).

In contrast, many people had struggled to get an appointment within a reasonable timeframe:

- *It always takes weeks to get an appointment with my GP and I don't even see my GP, just another doctor*
- *You have to wait 2-3 weeks for appointment.*
- *Had to wait two weeks for an appointment.*
- *I had to wait 3 weeks for an appointment*

- *Have to wait 3 weeks to get an appointment*
- *GP appointment takes 2 weeks.*
- *Used to be able to see the Dr on the same day, but now we have to wait 10 days.*
- *Can't get to see preferred GP for 2 weeks.*
- *Took a long time to get an appointment, min of 2 weeks!*
- *Appointments were all taken*

Further to this, whilst some patients didn't often have difficulties accessing emergency appointments, they did struggle to get non-urgent/routine appointments:

- *Find it hard to get an appointment with GP for me or my children unless it's an emergency*
- *There are never any appointments available only emergency*
- *Sometimes it takes 2 or 3 weeks for an ordinary GP appointment but there is always an 'emergency' appointment if necessary*
- *It is only possible to get a GP appointment on the same day if you go in as an emergency, otherwise it can take three weeks to get an appointment.*
- *The waiting lists for the GPs are always long but in an emergency they do fit you in.*
- *If you have an emergency they will see you the same day.*
- *Takes a while to get an appointment- have not needed an emergency appointment*
- *Was told had to wait a month but if rang at 8am next morning could get one that day.*

More specifically, patients who work indicated they find it particularly difficult to get an appointment due to practice opening hours:

- *Maybe more options outside working hours (before 9, after 5, lunch time)*
- *I have difficulty in getting appointments as I work full time*
- *No appointments for out of office hours so have to take time off work, difficult to get through by phone. Not a good service for working people*
- *Difficult to obtain an appointment at a convenient time and no appointments were available outside of working hours*
- *I think doctors surgeries should be open until 7pm as those who work are unable to make appointments earlier in the day*

We received several negative comments concerning GP practice's appointment booking systems. Some comments indicated they had difficulty getting through by telephone:

- *Would be better if there were more people to answer the phones*
- *Can't get appointment by phone because lines are always blocked in morning so have to queue for at least half an hour for reception to open.*
- *I didn't like that it takes forever to get through to the doctors on the phone!*
- *The GP surgery needs to make their phone lines more accessible*

When patients had got through, various comments showed that some people do not feel comfortable or understand the reasons for disclosing personal information to reception staff:

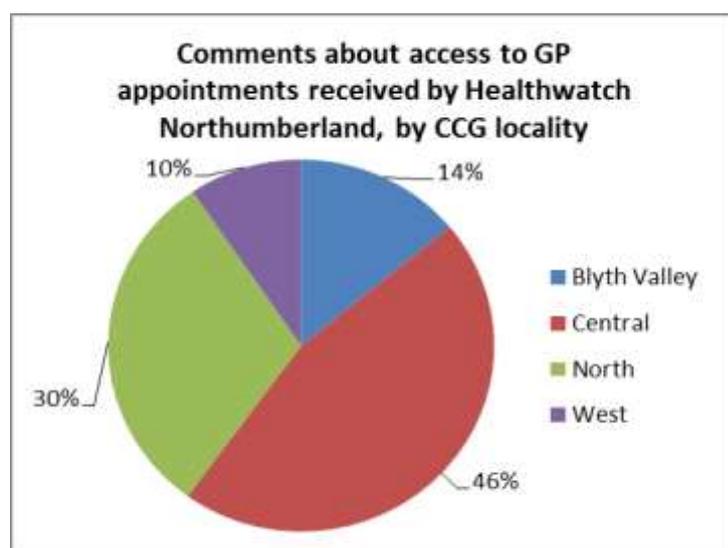
- *I don't feel it is right that I am expected to tell the receptionist what is wrong with me when I phone for an appointment to see the doctor.*
- *They ask about the problem which should be private*
- *When you ring you have to say why you need an appointment.*
- *I didn't like that he had to ring to tell them the problem then they decide if you can go to the doctors*

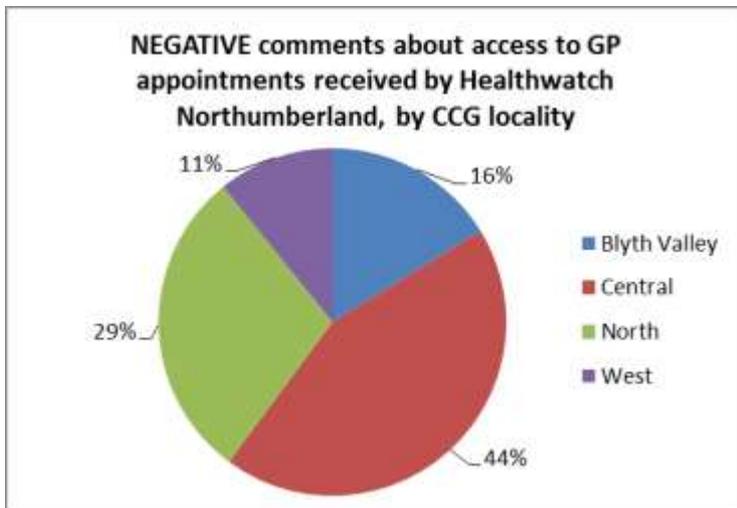
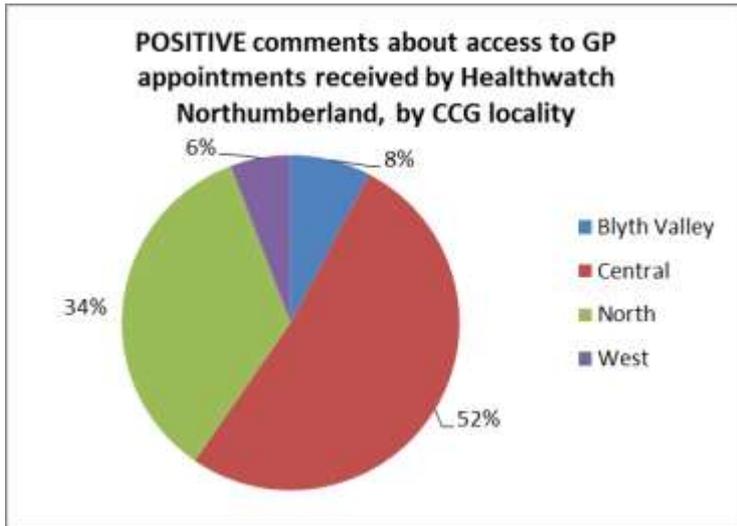
Whilst some saw the benefits of speaking to a GP (e.g. “my GP's do call backs so people who really need an appointment are prioritised”), other patients expressed their dissatisfaction with having to wait for a GP to call back, and highlighted the impracticalities associated with this:

- *Can't just go in and get appointment, have to call -not as easy as it was.*
- *When I needed to be seen they asked me to speak to a doctor over the phone before getting an appointment*
- *You then have to wait for the doctor to call you back - and you can't go anywhere until they call you back because you don't want to be discussing your problem on your mobile in the middle of the street*

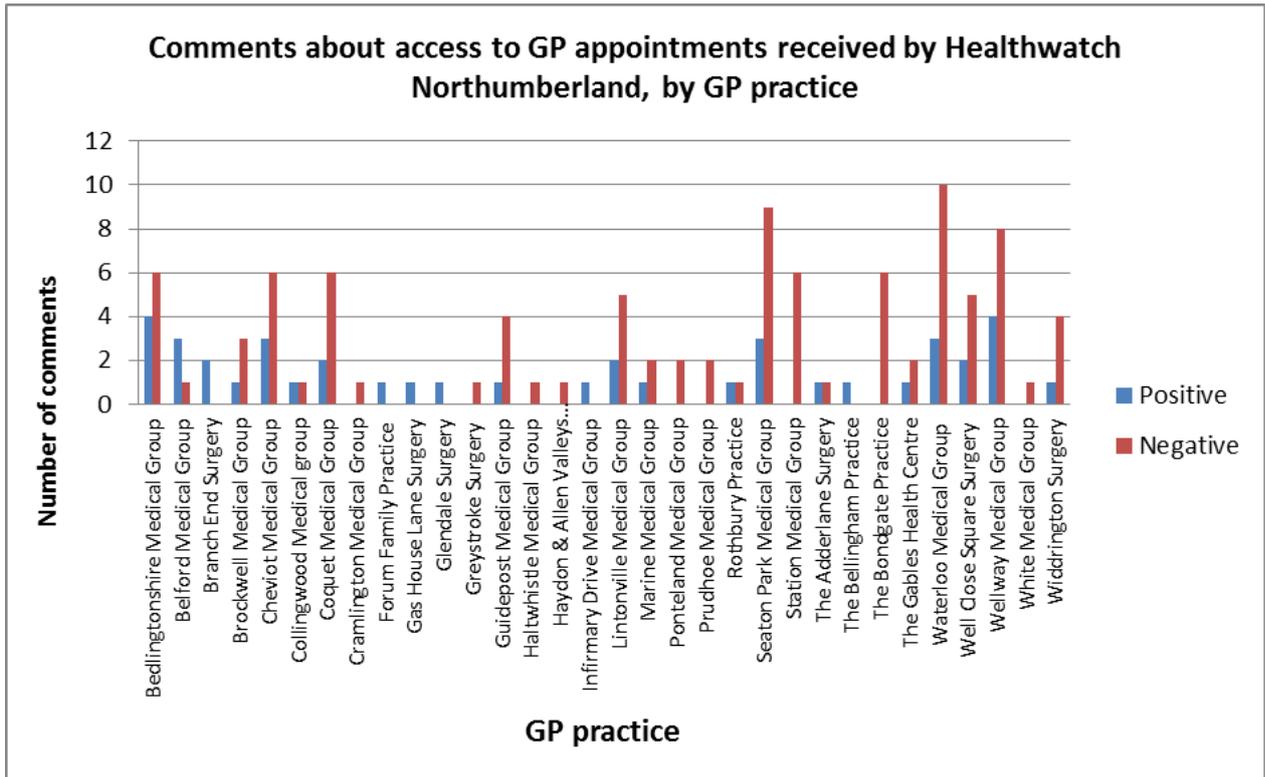
Lastly, with regards to being seen on time for appointments, some comments indicated that delays were rare (e.g. “the appointment was on time so I wasn't waiting longer than I had to” and “I only had to wait 10 minutes”). Whereas many other comments indicated they often had long waits to be seen (e.g. “had to wait 25 minutes to be seen”, “often have to wait for 30+ mins after appointment time”, “had to wait 30 minutes for my appointment”, “I didn't like that I had to wait for ages past my appointment time and they didn't even say sorry”, “they made me wait for 40 minutes”, “they tell you a time for the appointment and it's always late”).

The comments were first grouped depending on which CCG locality area (Blyth Valley, Central, North and West) the feedback was received from; this is presented in the graphs below.

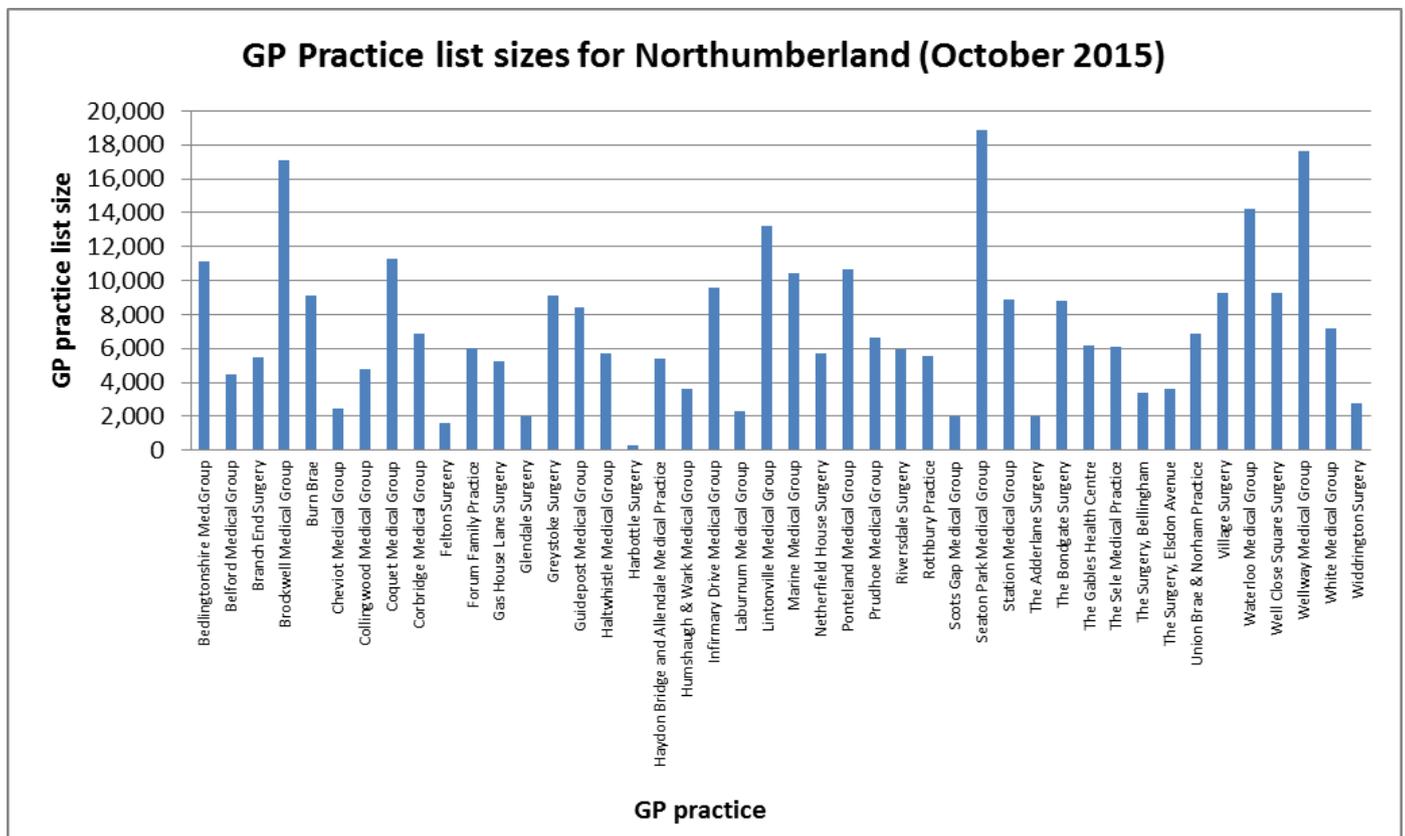




Further to this, the comments were examined by practice in terms of whether they were positive or negative. For 32% of the comments relating to accessing GP appointments, the practice location was unknown and of these, 89% of them were negative. For comments where the specific practice name was stated, these are presented below in the graph. Please note, however, the numbers of comments per practice are relatively small.



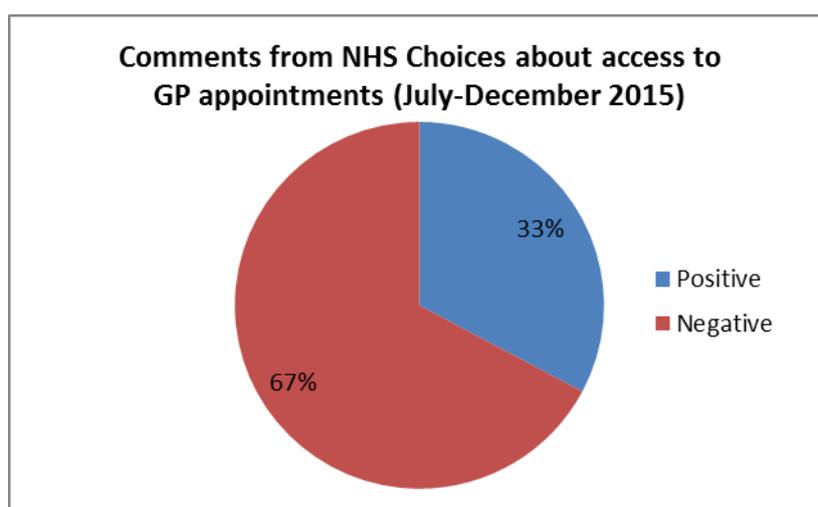
The figures in the above graphs should be considered proportionately, in relation to the total number of patients registered at each practice. For this reason, the table below has been included to show each GP practice's list size (as of October 2015 according to Northumberland CCG).



## Appendix 4 - NHS Choices Reviews (July-December 2015)

NHS Choices is a health information website that includes a service directory which supports people to find, choose and compare health, support and social care services. NHS Choices also gives patients the opportunity to anonymously and publically leave feedback or a “review” of a service they have used.

Healthwatch Northumberland examined reviews about GP practices posted on NHS Choices between July and December 2015. In total, there were 61 comments relating to accessing GP appointments. Of these, 33% were positive and 67% were negative.

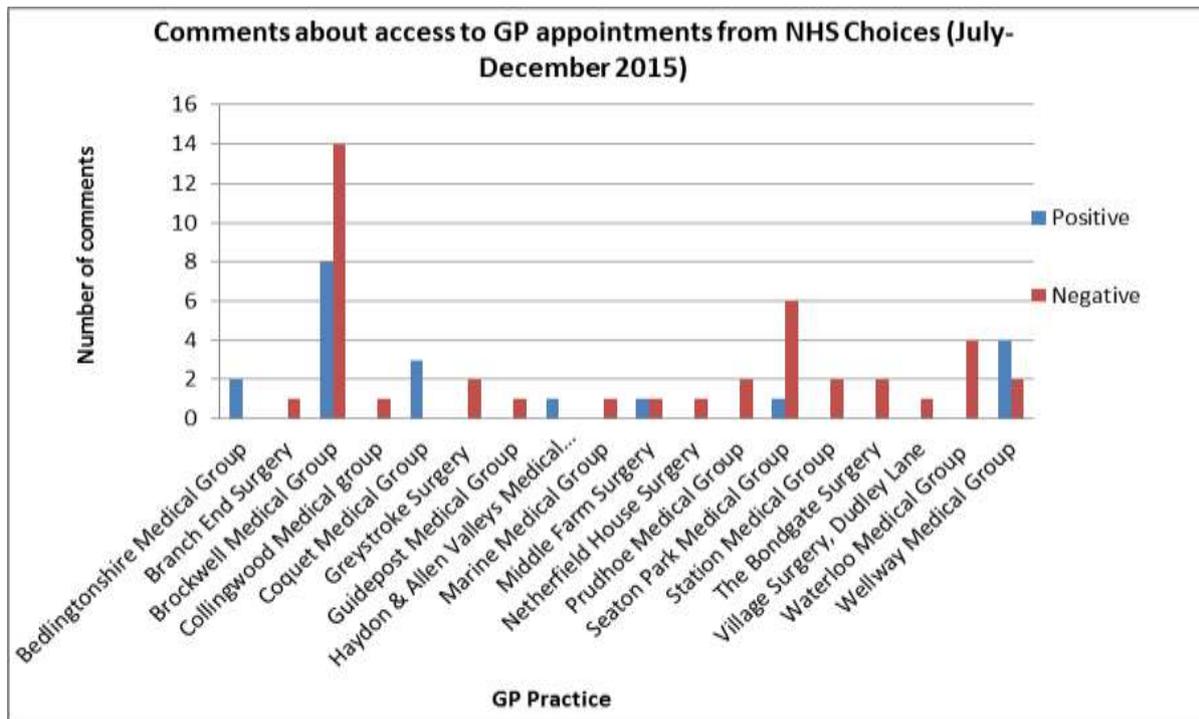


The themes derived from these reviews reflect both the positive and negative feedback from our recent Healthwatch Northumberland Access to GP Appointments patient survey as well as comments we have received by members of the public (e.g. at engagement events).

Positive reviews left on NHS choices relating to accessing GP appointments tended to focus on newly introduced appointment booking systems. Several comments highlighted that patients saw the benefits of this system for patients and staff in that it improved access to appointments and that some problems were solved over the phone and thus did not require a face-to-face appointment. Some people liked being called back promptly by a GP to discuss their concerns (often at an agreed time) and were able to access a same day appointment. Other positive comments covered extended opening hours and the ability to book appointments online.

Whilst there were positive comments about access to appointments, particularly surrounding booking systems, these were unfortunately outweighed by negative comments. Other comments relating to appointment booking systems indicated that it is time-consuming for both the GPs and patients and that it wastes time when patients know they need to see a GP. Many comments indicated that this system is not practical for patients who work as they are often unable to take personal calls and fear being overheard by colleagues, particularly when talking about sensitive topics; they felt discriminated against for this reason. Several patients also indicated their frustration about having to describe their problem to a receptionist, and then repeat this to a GP and possibly a third time if they subsequently attend an appointment.

Other comments about accessing GP appointments highlighted issues with engaged telephone lines, difficulties in booking appointments in advance (including online), GPs running late and that phoning up on the day you need one is not an effective system. As a result of having difficulties accessing an appointment, some patients have used walk-in centres or out-of-hours services as an alternative. A handful explained they have even considered changing practices as a consequence of their dissatisfaction. The graph below indicates which practices the comments referred to and whether these were positive or negative.



## Appendix 5 - National GP Patient Survey (Northumberland results - Ipsos MORI/NHS England)

An independent national GP Patient Survey is carried out annually by “Ipsos MORI” on behalf of NHS England to explore how people feel about their GP practice. It covers things such as patients’ experiences of making and waiting for appointments, perceptions of care, practice opening hours and out-of-hour services. In Northumberland over 11,000 questionnaires were sent out and over 5000 were returned (response rate of 45%). In most cases, patient satisfaction in Northumberland is higher than the national average.

The key findings relating to making GP appointments and waiting times for practices in Northumberland are as follows:

### Making an appointment, availability and convenience

- 38% of patients described their experience of making an appointment as “very good”, 38% rated it as “fairly good”, 13% answered “neither good nor poor”, 7% said it was “fairly poor” and 4% said it was “very poor”.

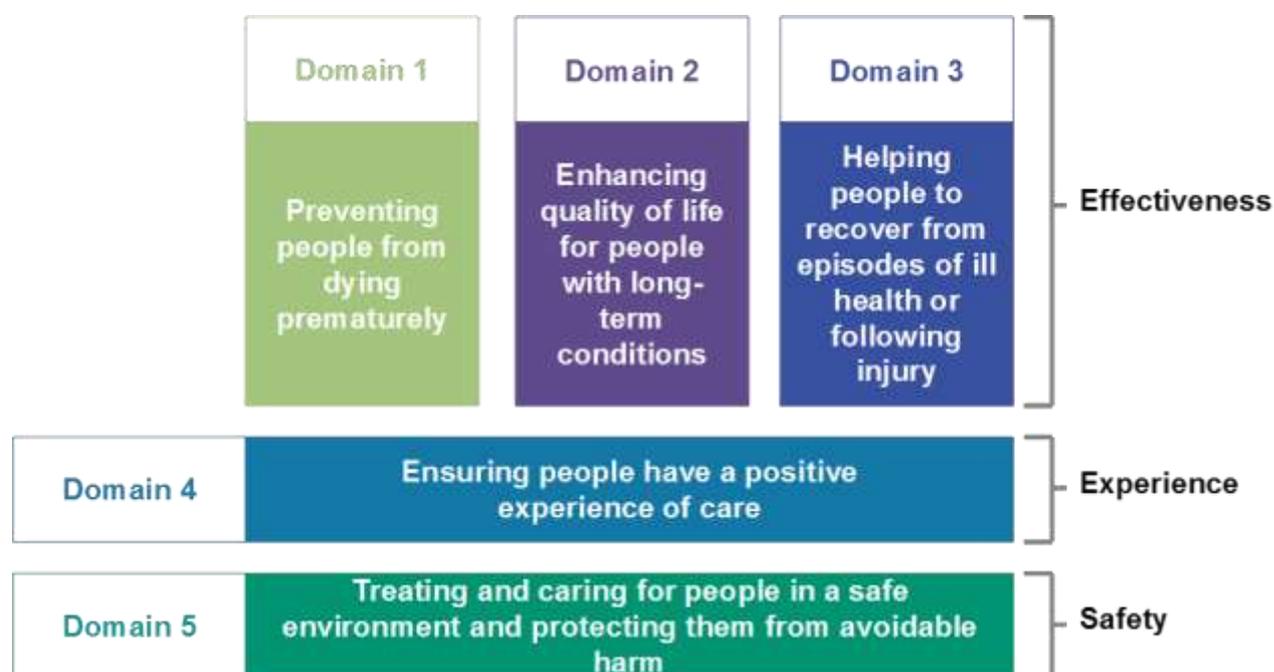
- The majority of patients said they book their appointments by telephone (88%) compared to 24% who do it in person and 9% who do this online.
- Three quarters of patients found it either “very easy” (32%) or “fairly easy” (43%) to get through to someone at the GP surgery on the phone compared to 15% who said it was “not very easy” and 7% who said it was “not at all easy”. (4% of patients had not tried).
- 77% of patients were able to get an appointment when they wanted to see/speak to a GP or nurse, compared to 10% who did not and a further 9% who were told to call back closer to or on the day of they wanted an appointment (and 4% could not remember).
  - o When asked when they wanted to see/speak to GP or nurse, 32% said same day, 12% said next working day, 26% said a few days later, 7% said a week or more later and 20% didn’t have a specific day in mind (and 4% couldn’t remember).
  - o When asked when they actually saw/spoke to GP/nurse, 29% said same day 12% said next working day , 37% said a few days later and 18% said a week or more later (and 4% couldn’t remember).
- With regards to convenience, 52% of respondents said their appointment was “very convenient”, 41% said it was “fairly convenient”, 6% said “not very convenient” and 1% answered “not very convenient at all”.
  - o Reasons for not being able to get an appointment or why the appointment offered was inconvenient were as follows: 49% said there weren’t any appointments for the *day* they wanted, 17% there weren’t any appointments for the *time* they wanted, 8% couldn’t see their preferred GP, 13% couldn’t book ahead at their GP surgery and 13% selected “other”.
  - o Of the patients who could not get an appointment or were offered an inconvenient one, 35% went to the appointment they were offered, 25% got an appointment for a different day, 12% had a telephone consultation, 4% went to A&E, 1% visited a pharmacist, 6% used another NHS service, 10% contacted their practice another time and 10% didn’t see or speak to anyone.

### Waiting for an appointment

- It was found that 13% of patients waited less than 5 minutes for their appointment, 61% waited 5-15 minutes and 18% waited more than 15 minutes (5% couldn’t remember and 3% don’t normally have appointments at a particular time).
- With regards to how they feel about these waits, 67% of patients said they “don’t normally have to wait too long”, 18% said they “have to wait a bit too long” and 6% said they “have to wait far too long” (9% didn’t have an opinion or it didn’t apply).

A breakdown of the findings, practice by practice, can be found on the GP Patient Survey website - <https://gp-patient.co.uk/>. These findings are often cited in CQC inspection reports.

## Appendix 6 - NHS England's Outcome Framework



## Appendix 7 - Summary of CQC inspection reports (July-December 2015)

Between July and December 2015, 11 Care Quality Commission (CQC) reports were published following inspections of GP practices in Northumberland. These have been examined in terms of access to GP appointments and largely the findings were very positive. There were many instances of good practice identified with regards to accessing GP appointments, for example:

- Offering patients appointments outside of school hours as well as offering extended opening hours for patients who work (both before and after usual opening times)
- The availability of routine and same day appointments within a reasonable timescale and in many circumstances for appointments requested with a particular GP
- Longer appointments made available to patients with more complex needs (e.g. learning disabilities, multiple or complex health conditions)
- Having pre-bookable appointments which can be arranged several weeks in advance
- The availability of telephone consultations/advice
- Having multiple methods of booking appointments (e.g. online, in person, phone)
- One practice arranged appointment times around the bus timetable

- Practice specific findings from the National GP Patient Survey indicated that most of the practices inspected were performing above average with regards to access to GP appointments

There were only a few instances where issues relating to accessing GP appointments had been noted; these were in connection with lack of appointments provided in extended hours (or no extended hour appointments offered) as well as the number of appointments being offered per week relative to practice size not meeting national guidance.

## **Appendix 8 - Northumberland CCG Patient Forum Events (July 2015 and February 2016)**

The Northumberland Clinical Commissioning Group's Patient Forum event (July 2015) also raised some interesting issues relating to accessing GP appointments. Feedback from their event indicated that accessing GP appointments (particularly for working adults) can still be problematic; however, this varies considerably across Northumberland. The main reasons for this appeared to be due to the opening hours of the practice and the current demand on GPs. This also reflects the other sources of feedback described above.

In some cases, patients found telephone consultations very beneficial; however the limits of these were also acknowledged. Patients also valued being able to book appointments online but highlighted that not all patients have internet access.

Suggestions were made for some practices to provide 8am-8pm services, but perhaps just one or two days a week or for practices which are geographically close to work together to provide primary care services outside of normal hours. Furthermore, 24/7 access to primary care services through walk-in centres and "hubs" was also seen as desirable. However, some attendees had concerns about how effectively patient information would be shared between services.

More recently, the 2016 Patient Forum Event (February) discussed the proposed new model for delivery primary and acute care via table discussions (e.g. "Helping you to access the right NHS services, at the right time"). Largely, comments reflected other sources of feedback, however, we are awaiting the feedback from this event to be published.

## **Appendix 9 - GP Practice website information**

Healthwatch Northumberland also did some desktop research and examined GP practice websites. We looked for whether there was information about practice opening times, how to make an appointment and details the Friends and Family test.

- All practices (44) displayed practice opening times on their website.

- All practices (bar one) also had some information about booking appointments, however, the depth and breadth of information provided varied considerably. Practices with more in depth and useful information covered things such as:
  - Ways of booking appointments (e.g. phone, online and in person) and when this can be/should be done
  - Information about triaging methods (if applicable) and their aims/benefits
  - Availability of telephone consultations/advice (if applicable)
  - Patient choice - option to request to see a particular GP (but explained this may take longer than seeing any GP)
  - How far in advance appointments can be booked
  - Duration of typical GP appointment (typically 10 minutes) and encouraging booking double appointments for multiple or complex health issues
  - How much information (if any) needs to be shared with the receptionist, and why
  - Encouraging cancellation of appointments if patients can no longer attend and highlighting the impact of DNAs on other patients
- Further to this, 40 practice websites mentioned that patients can also book appointments online
- Signposting to other services was limited - whilst most practices referred to 111 and 999, only a handful referred to “Think Pharmacy First”, walk-in centres and A&E. However, approximately half of the websites had ‘self-help’/‘self-care’ information.
- With regards to the Friends and Family test, we were unable to find any information about this on 16 of the GP practices’ websites. Of the remaining 28 practices, 26 of these offered patients the opportunity to complete the questionnaire online (although in a few instances the link didn’t appear to work). The 2 remaining practices mentioning the Friends and Family test explained it could be completed in the surgery.
- Of the 28 practices which mentioned the Friends and Family test, we could only find the results of these on 7 practice websites. A few of these were quite outdated and/or had a low response rate.

## Appendix 10 - Frequency of patient responses, by GP practice

The table below indicates the number of patient responses, per each GP practice. Comments from when patients were asked “do you have any other comments about your experience of accessing a GP appointment?” have been analysed in terms of if they indicated whether their experience was largely positive, neutral or negative - this is also displayed below.

GP Practice	No. of patient responses	Overall positive experience	Overall neutral experience	Overall negative experience	No comments/ not applicable
Bedlingtonshire Medical Group	8	2	0	4	2
Belford Medical Group	1	1	0	0	0
Branch End Surgery	1	1	0	0	0
Brockwell Medical Group	4	1	0	2	1
Burn Brae Medical Group	4	1	0	0	3
Cheviot Medical Group	3	3	0	0	0
Collingwood Medical Group	0	0	0	0	0
Coquet Medical Group	3	1	0	1	1
Corbridge Medical Group	0	0	0	0	0
Cramlington Medical Group	1	0	0	1	0
Elsdon Avenue Surgery	0	0	0	0	0
Forum Family Practice	3	0	1	2	0
Gas House Lane Surgery	6	4	0	1	1
Glendale Surgery	3	3	0	0	0
Greystoke Surgery	7	3	0	3	1
Guide Post Medical Group	1	0	0	1	0
Haltwhistle Medical Group	2	2	0	0	0
Haydon Bridge & Allendale Medical Practice	5	4	0	1	0
Humshaugh & Wark Medical Group	2	0	0	0	2
Infirmery Drive Medical Group	0	0	0	0	0
Laburnum Medical Group	0	0	0	0	0

Lintonville Medical Group	5	0	0	5	0
Marine Medical Group	4	2	1	1	0
Middle Farm Surgery	2	1	0	1	0
Netherfield House Surgery	1	1	0	0	0
Ponteland Medical Group	2	0	0	2	0
Prudhoe Medical Group	5	3	0	0	2
Riversdale Surgery	2	1	0	0	1
Rothbury Practice	3	2	0	0	1
Scots Gap Medical Group	0	0	0	0	0
Seaton Park Medical Group	10	1	1	4	4
Station Medical Group	1	0	0	1	0
The Adderlane Surgery	2	2	0	0	0
The Bellingham Practice	0	0	0	0	0
The Bondgate Surgery	7	1	1	5	0
The Gables Medical Group	0	0	0	0	0
The Sele Medical Practice	3	1	0	1	1
The Village Surgery	3	2	0	0	1
Union Brae & Norham Practice	3	0	0	1	2
Waterloo Medical Group	1	0	0	0	1
Well Close Medical Group	9	2	0	7	0
Wellway Medical Group	16	4	1	6	5
White Medical Group	1	1	0	0	0
Widdrington Surgery	2	0	0	2	0
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>29</b>