



Experiences of GP Practices in Tameside

February 2025

healthwatch
Tameside

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About us

Who we are

Healthwatch Tameside is your local health and social care champion. If you use GPs and hospitals, dentists, pharmacies, care homes or other support services, we want to hear about your experiences. As an independent statutory body, we have the power to make sure NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to your feedback and improve standards of care. Last year we helped many people like you to have your say and get the information and advice you need.

Our approach

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

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

We use the feedback we receive about health and care services in an anonymous way. We talk to the providers and commissioners of those services to let them know what is working well, and where people think improvements could be made.

Why we did this report

Healthwatch Tameside were receiving feedback at outreach events from people struggling to see their GP, specifically that people were finding it difficult to use online services to book appointments. We wanted to see how widespread this issue was across Tameside, and if there were any recurring issues which we could raise with providers to help improve patient access to GP appointments.

Method



We ran a survey from October 2023 to February 2024, which was available to complete online, in paper form, over the phone, and via QR code. There were 220 responses overall - 9 people completed the survey over the phone, 104 on paper, 104 online, and 3 via QR code. We promoted the survey online on social media, through our e-bulletin, and in-person at outreach events.

We asked people:

- Which GP Practice they were registered with, what worked well, what they thought could be improved, and for any other comments they had
- The method they used to make appointments
- Waiting times to get appointments and referrals to other services
- Where they were referred to and what the communication was like

The majority of survey questions asked for free text responses. This led to a wide range of detail within those responses. Some gave single word answers whilst others were more detailed and included more than one issue.

We reviewed every response in detail and recorded the issues mentioned, grouping them into themes.

What we found

This report contains a summary of the key themes we found from our survey. You can see the detailed analysis and how we arrived at our conclusions in our full report, found on our website: www.healthwatchtameside.co.uk

Access to appointments

When asked what could be improved, the largest number of comments related to making it easier and/or quicker to access appointments. Suggestions included increasing capacity and the number of appointments, as well as improving the methods of booking. When asked about waiting times for appointments, 68% of respondents said they had accessed an appointment within a week, with the largest number within that having an appointment within 3 days. However, there were multiple reports of 2-week, 3-week, and more than 3 weeks wait times. Some reported not being able to arrange an appointment at all. Within the theme of improving access, respondents told us they wanted:

Improved phone access

Respondents seemed to recognise that contacting the GP practice by phone is an effective and efficient use of their time and the resources of the Practice. It was the preferred method to contact the GP Practice, with face-to-face arranging of an appointment being seen as the last resort. Many respondents had positive experiences accessing the Practice by phone. Older people favoured this method, preferring to speak to someone.

However, people also had negative experiences of contacting their Practice by phone, citing:

- Having to ring at 8am to get an appointment (a common negative experience amongst participants)
- Waiting in a call queue for long periods of time
- Calls not being answered, even sometimes after waiting in a call queue

Improved face to face access

This was by far the least favoured method of arranging an appointment; as mentioned above, respondents recognised it should be the last resort. There were examples of people feeling they had no alternative to secure an appointment because they ran out of slots quickly on the phone.

However, face to face was the preferred (and most common) method of having the appointment, with multiple comments stating that too many appointments are carried out by the GP over the phone. There were a number of comments asking for more face-to-face appointments to be available.

Improved online access

This was the second-most popular method of arranging an appointment, with some positive experiences provided, but many online systems were reported to only work within certain hours or only as long as appointments were available. There was an increase in negative experiences amongst people that used it after being unable to get through to the Practice on the phone.

There was a clear indication that if online access worked better, many respondents would use it.

More staff

Lots of respondents recognised the pressures on GP practices and called for more staff at all levels to increase the number of appointments available and improve the process for accessing them. When asked about seeing other practitioners within the Practice, the majority saw the GP or Nurse. Only small numbers saw other practitioners such as Paramedics, Pharmacists and Physician Associates.

Better weekend/evening access

As part of the comments that wanted easier and/or quicker access to appointments, some respondents wanted more accessibility to appointments at evenings and weekends.

Clearer communication about how to access the GP

A number of respondents also commented on how it is unclear how their GP practice wants them to make appointments. Websites do not always have up to date information and guidance on this for patients.



“They need to stop patients queuing to make appointments at 8am in person as this takes precedence over patients trying to get through on the phone. They need to answer their phone. If you select an option that isn’t



appointment, then the phone just rings & rings then you get cut off. They should hold a patient feedback group after hours to understand what is working and what isn’t, then act on it.”

“COMMUNICATION! How was I meant to have known that I can only get an appointment on the internet? 'Healthy Hyde' in the Clarendon shopping centre gave me the wrong instructions because they didn't know that Haughton Thornley didn't use 'Find My Doc'”

Working Well

The next highest number of comments talked about how well their GP Practice works and how grateful they are to the GPs and staff. This was also the issue that was mentioned the most when respondents were asked for any additional comments.



"Our practice is perfect with excellent staff"



"I was very surprised. My GP had recently retired and was a little anxious about seeing someone else, but delighted with what happened and very grateful."

Attitudes

The attitude of staff, feeling listened to, and feeling that staff are caring was a theme across a number of issues raised. Suggestions based around this theme included:

- Be more caring/patient orientated
- Improve receptionist training/attitudes
- More time to discuss issues
- Improve access for mental health issues

Respondents were generally positive about the attitudes of GPs during appointments, but some felt that they were not listening or not giving enough time to listen.

The most divisive role amongst respondents was the receptionist. Comments were split between them being polite and helpful vs examples of them being rude and obstructive.



"The GP listened to what was being said and was helpful and caring, referred to physio"



"Receptionists are overstretched so not very pleasant or polite"

Online & digital exclusion

As mentioned earlier, there were calls from respondents to improve access to online methods of arranging appointments. It is interesting to note that there was only 1 mention of an appointment being held online.

Respondents were concerned about the digital exclusion of those less able to use online tools. Many of the comments mentioned older people's challenges in this area, and they indicated this group would be more likely to use telephone or face to face methods to make appointments.



"My Father does not have the internet & finds it very difficult to get an appointment. I would like older people like my Father to be able to make an appointment over the phone & not be talked through the triage



process. Dad gets confused so avoids this process which is not good"

Communication and accessibility

88% of respondents were positive about the communication they had with their GP Practice, but there were also examples of poor communication. Receptionists were mentioned more than any other role in the GP Practice regarding communication, indicating they are a key point of contact. There were more negative than positive experiences of communicating with receptionists.

Accessibility was raised through two issues:

- Improve accessibility for people with disabilities/sensory impairments
- Improve access for people for whom English is not their first language



"Understanding disability. Reading and writing is hard for me."

"To make it more user-friendly for those who don't speak or read English"



Continuity and consistency

There were various comments on improving continuity and consistency; issues included being able to see the same doctor, having more time to discuss complex issues, and speaking with staff that understand their history.



"I think the main problems are making appointments, especially when you have a lot of serious ailments, otherwise most things are okay. It would also be nice to have a regular doctor who gets to know you instead of locums"



Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, we have formulated the following set of recommendations for the Greater Manchester Integrated Care Partnership (Tameside), who commission GP services in Tameside:

1. Review compliance with the Accessible Information Standard across GP services in Tameside

Accessibility issues were raised by multiple respondents, with a particular focus on access for people with disabilities and/or sensory impairments, and for people who struggle to use online services. Therefore, we recommend that a review of compliance with the Accessible Information Standard is carried out across GP services in Tameside, with the aim of ensuring all GP services in Tameside are meeting the standard within the next 12 months. This could begin with sending out guidance to all practices on how to meet the standard (e.g. the NHS online GP toolkit) and should include some follow-up action within the 12-month timeframe to assess what changes have been made.

2. To share information with Healthwatch Tameside about any activities which are planned to improve continuity of care across GP services in Tameside

A lack of continuity within care was mentioned in 16 comments, with respondents discussing themes including being unable to see the same doctor, needing more time to discuss complex issues, and wanting to speak with staff that understand their history. Therefore, we would like to understand if there are any planned activities to improve continuity of care across GP services in Tameside.

3. To share information with Healthwatch Tameside about any activities to improve access to GP services via phone and online services

Access to GP practices via phone and online services was the biggest issue mentioned by respondents, with 63 comments made on this issue. Common themes include struggling to get through to practices on the phone, having to wait in long queues on the phone, being unable to use online services, and delays due to practices being short-staffed. Therefore, we would like to understand if there are any planned activities to improve access to GP services via phone and online services in Tameside.

4. Review the use of Patient Participation Groups within Tameside GP services

A number of respondents suggested that practices could be more 'patient oriented', and wanted to feel listened to. Some felt that they needed more time to discuss issues, or had negative experiences when communicating with staff. Therefore, we recommend a review of the use of Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) across GP services in Tameside, with the aim of ensuring all GP services in Tameside are meeting the requirement of having a PPG set up within the next 12 months.

Other things to note:

Alongside our recommendations, we feel it is important to note the following:

- Many people were very positive about their GP practice and the staff they communicated with. 38% of 138 respondents (52) to the 'Any other comments' question said that their GP practice was working well, and when asked about communication, 88% of 129 comments (113) were positive.
- Many of the issues raised, including capacity for appointments, staffing levels, and long wait times, may relate to wider issues affecting the NHS and Health and Care sector, such as funding levels and increased pressure on services, and we recognise that individual GP practices may be limited in their ability to address these problems themselves. We have therefore addressed our recommendations to the service commissioner, to influence change at a higher level
- We also note that the issues mentioned above may be difficult to solve over a 12- to 18-month timeframe at a local level, and may well require a National approach with more time and resources available; we have therefore tried to keep these recommendations as realistic as possible for

the GM ICP (Tameside) to achieve, whilst balancing this with creating meaningful change to Tameside services.

Next Steps

Lots of people were happy with their GP Practice and felt nothing could be improved. Where improvements were needed, there were a wide range of issues and lots of variation of how and when these occurred. We are aware of work happening in Tameside to improve access to GP appointments, and will share our findings to inform this work.

Next steps

Following the findings of this report we will:

- Share our findings with GP Practices and NHS GP Contract Managers.
- Share our findings with the Tameside Primary Care Commissioning Committee and monitor activity in progress to improve the areas our report has highlighted.
- Share our recommendations with the Greater Manchester Integrated Care Partnership (Tameside), who commission GP services in Tameside.
- Use the themes from this report to inform our next priorities.



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