

Accessing GP Services: Views from Hertfordshire's Parents and Carers

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About Healthwatch Hertfordshire

Healthwatch Hertfordshire represents the views of people in Hertfordshire on health and social care services. We provide an independent consumer voice evidencing patient and public experiences and gathering local intelligence to influence service improvement across the county. We work with those who commission, deliver and regulate health and social care services to ensure the people's voice is heard and to address gaps in service quality and/or provision.

About the Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care System (ICS)

The Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care System (ICS) was established as a statutory body on 1st July 2022. Integrated Care Systems are geographically based partnerships that bring together providers and commissioners of NHS services with local authorities and other local partners to plan, coordinate and commission health and care services¹. The Hertfordshire and West Essex ICS is made up of two key bodies – an Integrated Care Board (ICB) and Integrated Care Partnership (ICP).

Integrated Care Board (ICB)

The Integrated Care Board (ICB) is an NHS organisation responsible for planning and overseeing how NHS money is spent across Hertfordshire and West Essex, with the aim of joining up health and care services, improving health and wellbeing and reducing health inequalities. The board of the ICB includes representations from NHS trusts, primary care and from Hertfordshire County Council and Essex County Council².

This report will be sent to the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICB Primary Care Board to inform how it can further support GP services.

Integrated Care Partnership (ICP)

The Integrated Care Partnership (ICP) is made up of representatives from different organisations involved in health and care. This includes NHS organisations, local authorities and the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector. The partnership is responsible for developing an Integrated Care Strategy which will set out the priorities for Hertfordshire and West Essex for the next 10–20 years³.

¹ [Integrated care systems: how will they work under the Health and Care Act? | The King's Fund \(kingsfund.org.uk\)](https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/integrated-care-systems)

² [Health and wellbeing decisions – Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care System \(hertsandwestessexics.org.uk\)](https://www.hertsandwestessexics.org.uk/health-and-wellbeing-decisions)

³ [Health and wellbeing decisions – Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care System \(hertsandwestessexics.org.uk\)](https://www.hertsandwestessexics.org.uk/health-and-wellbeing-decisions)

Hearing Patient Views about Primary Care in Hertfordshire and West Essex

Healthwatch Hertfordshire and Healthwatch Essex have been commissioned by the Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care Board (ICB) Primary Care Workstream to undertake a series of engagement projects. The aims of the engagement projects include:

- Gathering lived experiences to feed directly into the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICS Primary Care Workstream
- Supporting and enabling the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICS to achieve wider participant engagement
- Engaging patients and the public on programmes covering key priorities and areas of importance at a regional and local level
- Making recommendations to the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICS Primary Care Workstream so improvements can be implemented

Using patient and public feedback, each engagement project will focus on improving the relevant service(s) within different areas of primary care by making recommendations to the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICB Primary Care Board.

From August to November 2022 the Director of Primary Care Transformation at the ICB has requested Healthwatch Hertfordshire and Healthwatch Essex to explore access to GP services with a specific focus on engaging with:

- Parents, carers and children and young people
- Residents living in the Borough of Broxbourne (and Harlow and Uttlesford for West Essex)

Reasons for exploring access to GP services, as well as parents, carers and children and young people are outlined below.

Please note a separate report has been published which outlines the findings from our engagement with residents living in the Borough of Broxbourne. This report can be found on our website.

Background

National Context

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, GP practices across the county were facing significant and growing strain, with increasing staff shortages and workloads, rising patient demand and struggles recruiting and retaining staff. This started to have a negative impact, with patients finding it increasingly difficult to access their GP practice – whether this be for an appointment, information and advice, or general support. Patients were also seeing a reduction in choice when making an appointment, with many not able to choose the location, time or date of their

appointment, the type of appointment they received, and changes to which healthcare professional they could see or speak to.

The Covid-19 pandemic only worsened these existing pressures and even now as we learn to live with Covid-19, GP practices are still facing increased workloads and higher consultation rates than ever before. As a result, patients are struggling even more to access their GP practice or to get an appointment, and patient choice is further restricted.

The pandemic also necessitated new ways of working, including a rapid uptake of digital technology and services to deliver care, for example through the use of remote consultations and online booking systems. Although this has provided a number of benefits, patients had concerns that face to face appointments in particular would be replaced with online or remote alternatives.

This decline in patient satisfaction with GP services is reflected in the results of the national GP Patient Survey (2022)⁴ which highlights a significant decrease in the number of people stating that they had a good experience when accessing GP services, with many noting a lack of choice, availability in appointments, and increased difficulty getting through to their GP practice. Particularly concerning is the rise in the number of people who are avoiding accessing their GP practice despite needing care. This could have a significant impact on people's long-term health and could lead to an increase in demand elsewhere in the NHS, such as in A&E, evidence of which we can already see.

The following is reflected within the recent Fuller Stocktake report published in May 2022, which also outlines the opportunities Integrated Care Systems have for integrating primary care and improving the access, experiences and outcomes for communities⁵.

Local Context

Parents, Carers and Children and Young People

Although we are aware of the problems adults tend to face when accessing their GP practice for themselves, we often do not hear about their experiences when trying to get support from the GP practice for their child or the young person they care for.

It is important to hear the lived experience of parents and carers and whether they can access the GP practice with ease and confidence for their child or the young person they care for. This is particularly important as children cannot always communicate their symptoms or health needs. The need of a clinical examination in these cases is particularly important for avoiding and preventing ill health in children and young people.

⁴ GP Patient Survey 2022 results - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

⁵ Microsoft Word - FINAL 003 250522 - Fuller report[46].docx (england.nhs.uk)

Both nationally and locally, stakeholders often do not hear from children and young people about their experiences of accessing their GP practice and whether their experiences differ from those of adults. With many children and young people able to call, visit or use online GP services without needing consent, it is important to understand what support is needed to ensure this process is as accessible as possible.

Aims

The aims of this engagement project included:

- Identifying the barriers parents, carers and children and young people encounter when accessing GP services
- Understanding the challenges parents, carers and children and young people face when making an appointment with their GP practice
- Exploring the factors preventing parents, carers and children and young people, despite needing care, from accessing GP services
- Understanding how the use of technology is being used by parents, carers and children and young people and whether this is hindering or supporting access to GP services
- Making recommendations to the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICS Primary Care Workstream with the aim of ensuring greater ease and confidence when accessing GP services

Methodology

To explore the above aims, Healthwatch Hertfordshire created two online surveys. One survey was for parents and carers who have a child or care for someone under the age of 18, and the other was aimed children and young people aged between 13 and 18 years old. Participants had the option to request the survey in an alternative format and/or contact us for support.

Although there was the option to request the surveys in an alternative format, all respondents completed the survey online. This indicates that all of the respondents not only have access to online technology, but also feel competent using it. We would recommend that the ICB looks to engage with those who do not have digital access to ensure their experiences and views are heard.

This age bracket was chosen as children and young people within this age range are more inclined to contact their GP practice independently without needing consent. From the age of 13, children and young people are also able to consent and participate in research without requiring supervision.

The engagement period for both surveys ran from 15th August to 17th October 2022. The surveys were promoted via social media and shared with the NHS and other statutory services and the , voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector across Hertfordshire to share and distribute via their networks, contacts and social media channels.



Key findings: Views and Experiences of Parents, Carers and Children and Young People



Demographics and Context

In total 231 parents and carers shared their views and experiences with us⁶. 70% were aged between 25 and 44 years old and 29% were aged between 45 and 64 years old. One respondent was aged over 65. 93% of respondents were female and 5% were male.

Over a quarter (28%) of respondents were from ethnically diverse communities, with 70% of a White British background⁷.

33% of respondents identified as a carer, 6% considered themselves to have a disability and 9% considered themselves to have a long-term condition.

Parents and carers shared which GP practice their child or the young person they care for is registered with. The full list of GP practices can be found in the appendix.

It is important to note that we acknowledge the significant challenges faced by GP practices and the findings highlight good practice as well as areas for potential improvement.

Making an Appointment

The majority of parents and carers had a recent experience of trying to get an appointment with the GP practice for their child or the young person they care for, with 79% having tried to do so in the last six months.

Before trying to make an appointment for their child or the young person they care for, 49% looked for information and advice elsewhere. Common routes included searching for information online, the NHS website, NHS 111 and the local pharmacy.

When trying to make an appointment for their child or the young person they care for, 83% called the GP practice, with only 10% using online services and 4% visiting the GP practice in person. Most parents and carers had problems when trying to make an appointment, particularly those who had tried to contact by telephone, with many respondents having to wait in the telephone queue or on hold for over an hour before speaking to a receptionist.

“Took about 2 hours waiting on hold to get through.”

“Had to dial 48 times before getting through to the long winded message saying to call back another time because they are experiencing high volumes of calls (this message is always on). Eventually I got through where I had to wait even longer before talking to a receptionist.”

⁶ Percentages do not always add up to 100% due to some respondents choosing not to share demographic data with us.

⁷ Ethnicities included: Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, Bangladeshi, Arab, Asian and White, Black African, Black Caribbean, Black Caribbean and White, White Irish, other White backgrounds, and ethnicities not listed as options.

"I had a one and a half hour wait in the queue on the phone."

"It's crazy you either can't get through at all and when you do wait for anything it's at least 30 minutes. Last time it took 27 calls to get through in the morning."

Some respondents found it difficult to contact the GP practice due to their own work or caring responsibilities preventing them from being able to call for an appointment at the typical morning slot. Parents and carers also shared that it can be hard to get an appointment for their child or the young person they care for due to opening times for appointments being during school hours.

"I phoned at exactly 8:30am and was on hold for 45 minutes before being told that all appointments had been allocated for the day and that I would need to call back the following day. I work in a school and had to take 45 minutes off to call without success."

"I have to arrange care for my son so I can be at the surgery for 8:00am to queue for an appointment for him. It's easier than phoning from 8:00am as it usually takes forever to get through and then they have no appointments left for that day."

"Telephone waiting times are ludicrous. As the main carer I haven't got time for this."

"There is no appreciation of the difficulty of phoning at 8:30am when parents are either at work or on the school run."

Other parents and carers tried to contact the GP practice for an appointment but were immediately told that no appointments were available for their child or the young person they care for, even if the parent or carer was looking to book an appointment weeks in advance.

"I can never get through to my surgery and when I do they always say there are no appointments even though I've called first thing in the morning. They always tell me they have 80,000 patients and it's luck."

"No appointments available that day as lack of doctors on site. No way of booking an appointment in advance either."

"Recorded message said there were no appointments that day. I called when the appointment line first opened."

As a result, some parents and carers felt they had no choice but to contact NHS 111 or to take their child or the young person they care for to A&E to receive medical attention.

“It’s almost impossible to get a GP appointment. I have repeatedly had to take my son to A&E as there is no viable option. It’s appalling.”

“On one occasion I couldn’t get an appointment so we ended up at A&E.”

“Couldn’t get through. Tried for 3-4 days and ended up going through 111.”

However, other parents and carers had a positive experience when trying to make an appointment for their child or the young person they care for. This was often because they had used an online booking system such as eConsult and received a timely response. A few respondents noted that the GP practice had improved its telephone system meaning it was now much easier to get through to a receptionist.

“There was always a long queue on hold but this has now changed with the installation of a new phone system.”

“The new call back service is helpful as you don’t have to wait on hold in the queue.”

“For my 2 year old I am able to use their online consult system and that works very well.”

Choice in Appointments

For the parents and carers who were given an appointment for their child or the young person they care for by the GP practice, 51% were not offered any choice when making the appointment.

Type of Appointment

Only 16% of parents and carers could choose the type of appointment their child or the young person they care for was given – whether this be a phone call, video call or face to face. A large number of parents and carers felt their child or the young person they care for needed a face to face appointment because of their age and/or the symptoms they were displaying. Despite raising their concerns, their request was denied and a telephone appointment was given instead which parents and carers felt was inappropriate and unacceptable.

“My daughter had a rash. We were asked to upload images and a phone appointment was made in which the doctor said it’s hard to tell from a photo. Waste of everyone’s time and this is a 4 year old!”

“The issue was one with his stomach and we were offered a telephone appointment which meant no one could actually feel or see his stomach and ascertain why he was in pain.”

“I had to do a phone call first even though they couldn’t listen to his lungs over the phone!”

“I wasn’t given a choice. Just told a doctor would call me back for an assessment. As I was calling about a rash and temperature on my child I didn’t feel a telephone appointment would be helpful.”

One parent shared that they contacted their GP practice because their baby was having breathing difficulties. However, they were only given a telephone appointment in which the GP simply advised them to keep their baby in the same room. The parent was very upset with this response and felt unsupported by their GP practice.

“My son was denied face to face when he presented with breathing issues, despite having history of breathing issues due to being premature which was mentioned to the GP. The GP would only discuss over the phone and prescribed an inhaler and advised that I put him in a pram and in the room with me whilst I had a shower.”

Having the option to choose a face to face appointment rather than a remote or online consultation was particularly important to parents and carers caring for a child or young person with complex needs.

One parent was not offered a home visit by the GP practice even though their child is on a ventilator and was showing clear signs of deterioration.

“He is currently on a ventilator fighting for his life and no doctor felt it was serious enough to be seen.”

Another parent whose child has complex needs was also not given a face to face appointment, despite explaining that their child is non-verbal and cannot communicate their symptoms or health needs.

“My son is autistic, non-verbal and has cerebral palsy. Despite me giving this information to the receptionist and the doctor I was only given a video call. This isn't acceptable for a child who cannot communicate what he is feeling or what is wrong. Absolutely disgusting service from my GP. It's not the first time this has happened with my son either.”

In some cases, not receiving a face to face appointment led to the child or the young person being misdiagnosed and/or receiving inappropriate treatment for their condition or symptoms. A few parents even had to take their child or the young person they care for to A&E in order to get the care and support they needed. Parents and carers noted that this could have been avoided if their concerns were listened to and if a face to face appointment was initially offered.

“My child needed a face to face meeting but weekend telephone appointments with locums were the only option and this delayed diagnosis by several months.”

“We were only offered a telephone appointment despite my request for a face to face. My child was therefore not examined thoroughly and ultimately ended up requiring emergency treatment in A&E due to lack of intervention by the GP.”

“I was given a phone call where I was simply told he had a 'virus' and he'd be fine. Gut instinct and previous experience told me he definitely has a chest infection. I had to fight to convince the GP to see my child face to face. Shock horror he has a severe chest infection and needed antibiotics. It seems phone appointments are the default option at the surgery now and only after that can you possibly get a face to face.”

“Last 3 appointments were via call to get antibiotics for his chest infection. Although I am experienced I am not qualified to make a diagnosis. We ended up in A&E which could have been avoided.”

Choice of Healthcare Professional

Just 5% of parents and carers were able to choose which healthcare professional their child or the young person they care for could see. For some, seeing the same healthcare professional and receiving continuity of care was vital for ensuring their child or the young person they care for felt comfortable and did not have to repeat their story. This was particularly important to parents and carers caring for a child or young person with a learning disability or complex needs.

“My daughter has a learning disability so it is really important that she sees the same doctor who she trusts.”

"I could not have a face to face and not given the opportunity to see her own GP who knows her complexities."

"My child has complex needs so we needed to see his allocated GP."

Choice of Time and Date

23% of parents and carers could choose the time or date of the appointment offered to their child or the young person they care for. For some parents and carers, having this choice was essential due to their own work or caring responsibilities, or for meeting the needs of their child or the young person they care for.

"You pretty much have to accept the appointment you're offered. Despite telling them I'm a carer and he's disabled it never seems to be taken into account. It's what appointment they have or nothing."

"Telephone appointments at any time in the morning or afternoon are not helpful for people trying to work, especially when it immediately needs a face to face appointment which was obvious from the beginning."

Similarly, some parents and carers were told that their child or the young person they care for would have to wait up to five weeks for an appointment. Parents and carers were frustrated with this delay and felt their child or the young person they care for needed an appointment much sooner than what was offered.

"Three weeks waiting time for an appointment for a child is too long."

"I could only get a phone call or wait five weeks for a face to face appointment for her."

One parent even made the decision to access a private GP to get an appointment for their child after struggling to get an appointment with their own GP practice within a reasonable timeframe.

"I was extremely dissatisfied. I had to wait a day to be triaged and then waited for at least another week to get an appointment. This was one of a few examples where my children did not get a proper NHS service. We had to go private as a result."

Lack of Appointments

13% of parents and carers were not offered an appointment for their child or the young person they care for when they contacted the GP practice. For most respondents, they were not given an appointment simply because there were none available, even if they were looking to book in advance.

“My daughter needed a routine check up for her condition. I was looking for a couple of weeks time and even then I was told there were none.”

“Couldn’t get an appointment and I was on hold for nearly an hour to then be told there are no appointments available.”

However, some respondents were denied an appointment or signposted elsewhere by the GP practice. This was despite the parent or carer telling the GP practice that their child or the young person they care for was displaying symptoms which they felt required medical attention.

“No appointments available and no way to talk to anyone.”

“They told me to take him out of hours as they were busy.”

“Even though it is on his medical records from the hospital that he has to be seen by a doctor straight away, they would not see him.”

“They refused to see my son when he had an allergic reaction and came up in hives and had diarrhoea.”

Timely Response and Support

Unsurprisingly, most parents and carers shared negative experiences and their desire for improved services. However, it is important to acknowledge that some parents and carers praised the support they and their child or the young person they care for received from their GP practice.

“I have never had a problem getting my child an appointment. My doctor is amazing and so helpful. The team of people that work there are so helpful, kind and always there to help. I’ve never experienced any problems. Best surgery I’ve ever had.”

"I think the GP surgery is great and I never have any issues with them or getting support from them for my child."

"The GP practice is excellent and holistically supportive of our daughter's care – I cannot fault them."

Specific examples included parents and carers receiving a face to face appointment for their child or the young person they care for, in addition to, or instead of, an online or remote consultation. This was important to parents and carers as it meant they felt listened to by healthcare professionals, and that their concerns about their child or the young person they care for were being respected and valued.

"Always an excellent service. We needed a face to face appointment which we got on the same day."

"They took my concerns seriously. Seen face to face and my child was thoroughly assessed."

"My surgery is doing a superb job, always get an appointment and always get through on the phone quickly."

"Had an initial same day consultation and then my child was invited in to be seen by the same doctor an hour later."

Some respondents shared that they often receive a timely response from the GP practice and given support for their child or the young person they care for within a quick timeframe.

"I wasn't offered a choice of time, date location etc but that didn't matter as it was so quick and the appointment given for my child was suitable."

"The surgery has always been easy to get hold of and very responsive. Especially for my young child."

"Sent a photo of my granddaughter's ailment. Then the GP rang back with a diagnosis and prescribed medication."

Improving the Process

Access and Communication Routes

39% of parents and carers said their experience of making an appointment for their child or the young person they care for was either “good” or “very good” while 41% said it was “bad” or “very bad.”

When respondents were asked how the process of making an appointment could be improved, many parents and carers felt having access to an online booking system would be beneficial as it would be more accessible and provide another option for making an appointment, rather than having to rely on the telephone.

“I should be able to book online for an in person appointment. We have to call – we cannot go into the practice or book online.”

“I would love to have an online booking system where you can choose an appointment.”

Likewise, the majority of parents and carers felt it would be easier to make an appointment for their child or the young person they care for if telephone systems were improved and if waiting times on hold or in the telephone queue were significantly reduced.

“The phone system takes quite awhile to get through and becomes a little frustrating when trying to comfort a child with additional needs.”

“Do something about the long queues for appointments in the morning – by the time you get through all the appointments are gone.”

“Less queue times so you can get through to a receptionist quicker. I have had to ring 111 in the past as I just couldn’t get through.”

More Choice

A large number of parents and carers emphasised that they should be offered more choice when making an appointment for their child or the young person they care for. Access to face to face appointments was a priority for most parents and carers, especially as children and young people are not always able to communicate their symptoms and health needs. Being able to choose the time and date of the appointment, as well which healthcare professional they could

see was also particularly important to first time parents, and parents and carers who care for a child or young person with a disability, complex needs or a long-term condition.

“The phone appointments are useless as I personally think it’s impossible to diagnose a child who can’t tell you what’s wrong over the phone without physically seeing them.”

“I would have hoped by now for medically complex children like mine or any child that a parent is concerned about should be offered a face to face appointment.”

“If a parent wants a face to face appointment they should be able to get one, especially for a child that cannot speak yet. We are first time parents and I am not a healthcare professional. My son is on an inhaler (blue and brown) and we are constantly told it’s just a phase!”

“Covid-19 has impacted GPs but I do feel that children who are vulnerable/unable to articulate what is wrong/go downhill fast should have been prioritised for face to face.”

“Children with diagnosed physical conditions or who are completely non-verbal should be seen face to face without parents having to fight for it.”

Being able to see the same healthcare professional, or receiving an appointment within a short timeframe, was essential for parents and carers whose child or the young person they care for has ill mental health. In some cases, parents and carers had to access private therapy to get the mental health support their child or the young person they care for needed, as they could not get an appointment with their GP practice soon enough.

“I was very unsatisfied. We couldn’t get an appointment for up to six weeks. We are fortunate that we could access private medical and psychological care. Most parents are not in this position and would be left to feel unsupported in trying to help their child through a mental health crisis.”

“It worked great when my 6 year old had tonsillitis. We were seen the same day and collected the medicine straight away. When my 13 year old had mental health problems I was offered an appointment five weeks away. We have now gone private for the help we need.”

“They insisted on a phone appointment even though I explained that it was difficult for a 15 year old to talk about a sensitive issue over the phone. A phone appointment was not suitable for a mental health related complaint and was too far away.”

More Appointments and Priority for Children

Parents and carers felt that more appointments need to be made available for children and young people, as well as the ability to book routine and non-urgent appointments in advance and with greater ease. Respondents also noted that GP practices should be more mindful of work and caring responsibilities when speaking to and arranging appointments with parents and carers on behalf of their child or the young person they care for.

“Appointments need to be bookable in advance, not just on the day.”

“Telephone times to take account of working parents – if one call is missed you’re then unable to get back to the surgery and have to start all over again.”

“Offer more book in advance appointments, especially for those with children. Working parents can’t always drop everything all of a sudden to bring their child to an appointment in the next 30 minutes.”

“Even if you can’t get an appointment that day they could offer another instead of saying you will have to call tomorrow or take your chances.”

Equally, parents and carers said that children and young people should be given priority when it comes to getting an appointment with the GP practice, especially face to face appointments. Parents and carers shared that they are increasingly concerned with how difficult it can be to get an appointment for their child or the young person they care for, with their age and/or severity of their symptoms or condition not seeming to make a difference.

“There needs to be more appointments available for babies and very young children.”

“Children should be seen. People are being misdiagnosed, this is a child!”

“Children should be given priority for face to face as they are often unable to articulate properly what’s wrong and can go downhill fast. There needs to be a specific line/triage so children are dealt with without delay.”

Avoiding GP Services

Access

49% of parents and carers said they have avoided making contact with the GP practice for their child or the young person they care for in the last 12 months.

Instead of contacting the GP practice, 80% looked for information and advice elsewhere. The most common routes included searching for information online, visiting the local pharmacy, contacting NHS 111 and accessing private GPs.

Most parents and carers have been reluctant to access the GP practice because they have found it too difficult to get through, especially when trying to contact by telephone. Particularly concerning is the number of parents and carers who said they will avoid accessing the GP practice until their child or the young person they care for is too unwell.

"It's too much hassle so I put it off until my child is too poorly to avoid it any longer."

"It's too difficult. You're looking at a 40-50 minute wait on the phone which a) isn't practical and b) means appointments are usually gone."

"I am astounded at how unbelievably hard it has been to access basic medical care for my child. It has taken hours of my time and has been very stressful."

Some parents and carers have not contacted the GP practice because they assume that there will be no appointments available for their child or the young person they care for, or because there will not be an appointment that is either soon enough and/or face to face.

"I knew it would be hard to get an appointment."

"There are never any appointments available."

"I felt there wouldn't be any face to face appointments for him."

In some cases, parents and carers contacted NHS 111 or took their child or the young person they care for to an Urgent Care Centre because they feared that they would not get an appointment with the GP practice soon enough. A few respondents even accessed a private GP in order to get support for their child or the young person they care for.

"You can't get an appointment so we have used NHS 111."

"I visited the Urgent Care Centre for fear of not getting an appointment the next day or not getting through."

"We ended up paying to go private due to it being so difficult."

"We paid for a private GP as we were so frustrated."

Poor Experiences and Mistreatment

Other parents and carers have avoided contacting the GP practice for their child or the young person they care for after receiving a lack of support and mistreatment from the GP practice. Common examples included their child or the young person they care for being misdiagnosed, not listening to the concerns of the parent or carer, and receiving poor quality of care.

"My son was misdiagnosed 3 times and we ended up being referred to the hospital by an optician! Really disappointed by the service we received. My son was not seen once over a 5 week period despite contacting the surgery 4 times regarding the same issue!"

"I was not satisfied with the care my son received previously as they were too busy to help or care for his needs."

"My son has been in and out of hospital since the beginning of the year with a mystery illness but I have little to no help from the GP regarding this. We end up at the hospital every time as I know he will be seen by them and cared for by them. Whereas when I speak to the GP or try to speak to the GP I get nowhere."

One parent shared how healthcare professionals did not listen to their concerns about their child which resulted in a misdiagnosis of pneumonia and sepsis. As a result, the parent has avoided contacting the GP practice for their child after this serious incident.

"I have had such terrible experiences with misdiagnoses, incorrect treatment and lack of care. I have found that in the past GPs at my practice do not listen to me, feeling that they know more about my child than I do. This has resulted in misdiagnosis of pneumonia and sepsis, and multiple occasions where we have been sent away with advice and treatments that do not improve my child's symptoms. Unfortunately this is a known flaw in medical provision for women and their children and something that needs to change."

Similarly, a large number of parents and carers said they have not accessed the GP practice for their child or the young person they care for because of the previous poor treatment they have received from either reception staff and/or healthcare professionals. Parents and carers now feel hesitant to contact the GP practice in fear of being dismissed by staff, seen as a burden on the NHS, or judged for making contact about their child or the young person they care for.

“Fear of being dismissed by the GP as an anxious mother.”

“I feel judged, as such we have been made to feel that we should wait until his symptoms become worse/don’t get better.”

“The receptionists aren’t always kind, they make it difficult and I feel anxious before speaking to them.”

“Made to feel guilty for asking someone to see my child.”

Encouraging Access to GP Services

When respondents were asked what would encourage them to make contact with the GP practice for their child or the young person they care for, as previously emphasised, many parents and carers said they would be more inclined to access the GP practice if telephone systems were improved, or if they could book an appointment using an online system.

“Ability to get through on the phone or book appointments online.”

“I’d contact the GP if I knew I wouldn’t have to sit for hours redialling.”

“Easier to get in touch with and getting an appointment. It’s near impossible to get through to anyone right now.”

As mentioned earlier in the report, parents and carers would also be more likely to contact the GP practice if they knew an appointment would be available for their child or the young person they care for, and if they were given greater choice when making an appointment.

“Knowing a) I could see her own doctor and b) knowing we could see them face to face within a reasonable timeframe and c) given the choice of face to face or phone call/video call dependent on the urgency.”

“Being able to book in advance for your child and if I knew my child would be seen face to face.”

However, the majority of parents and carers said they would be far more inclined to contact the GP practice if reception staff and/or healthcare professionals listened and respected their concerns as a parent or carer, provided greater reassurance and understanding, and treated them with more kindness.

“Going to the doctors should not be a battle between patient and doctors to get the child well. Too many times doctors dismiss symptoms and send the child away. This leaves the child unwell or in pain, and in my case, being told they are ok. Doctors should listen to parents and trust what is reported.”

“Some of the receptionists could be a little kinder and not so patronising. I understand they have to deal with lots of people but please realise some people genuinely just want to see a doctor and aren't out to cause problems.”

“The NHS constantly ‘judge’ parents for what they have done or not done. There is not enough information about what to do and how we can help the NHS and our children. The last thing I want to do is waste a GP's time or any member of the NHS, however when I do call out for help, a level of understanding would be appreciated. Whilst healthcare professionals see things everyday, it could be a first time for parents!

Using Online Services

Accessing Online Services

49% of parents and carers do not have access to online services for their child or the young person they care for. For most, this is because they did not know they could have access to online services for their child or the young person they care for. Some respondents also shared that they did not know their GP practice offered online services, or what the benefits of using online services are.

A few respondents said they cannot access online services for their child or the young person they care for because this function has not been enabled by their GP practice.

“I have my own access but was told I can't use it for my children.”

“Not available for under 18s. Not even via the parent log in.”

Other respondents have encountered difficulties when trying to register with or access online services for their child or the young person they care for.

“Problems with access for my child on several occasions and I’ve now given up!”

“The registration/log in has been ridiculous since the system changed a few years ago. I haven’t successfully logged in for my child despite repeatedly registering.”

“I have issues accessing for my child due to errors when the account was set up and I’ve not be able to resolve this with reception staff at the GP practice.”

However, it is important to note that despite these barriers, 82% of parents and carers would request access to online services on behalf of their child or the young person they care for if they were given the opportunity and/or support to do so.

Improving Online Services

In comparison, 37% of parents and carers do have access to online services for their child or the young person they care for. When these respondents were asked how online services could be improved, most said that they should be able to use online services to book an appointment for their child or the young person they care for. For the majority, this option is not available.

“My GP practice will not allow us to book appointments for children online, only to view their medical record.”

“Please let us book appointments online and be able to send the GP a message! I don’t have time or the ability to sit in a phone queue for hours to talk to a receptionist who doesn’t understand the medical information I’m trying to explain. It causes so much stress and wastes everyone’s time.”

“We can no longer make online appointments which stopped during Covid-19 and never resumed.”

Some parents and carers noted that although their GP practice does offer the option to book appointments online for their child or the young person they care for, there is never availability, even if they look weeks or months in advance.

“I believe I can book appointments for my child but in reality there are never any available.”

“Technically you can book an appointment for children but even if you select in a month’s time it says there are no appointments!”

Parents and carers also felt that online services could be improved by enabling access to the medical records of their child or the young person they care for, and if they could share this information with other healthcare professionals to support with continuity of care.

“I can no longer access my child’s records through my access which I used to be able to do before Covid-19.”

“Need to be able to access my child’s medical records to enable more efficient transfer of information across healthcare settings.”

“Make sure parents can access their child’s full medical records if the parent has set up access.”

Significantly, a large number of respondents said there needs to be more information and communication on how parents and carers can access online services for their child or the young person they care for, and the benefits online services can offer, as most parents and carers are not aware. Respondents felt that the use of online services should be promoted more widely and that GP practices should work to build trust with parents and carers to ensure they feel confident accessing and using online services.

“I think communications about online services should be sent out either at the time of birth or upon undertaking the caring responsibility. I could have been provided with this information at one of my son’s standard check ups or immunisation appointments. Communication materials could also be provided to childcare/school settings for onward circulation to parents and carers.”

“There needs to be more information about online services for parents and carers. I wasn’t aware about them.”

“I think there needs to be better communication regarding alternative methods of making appointments could be put in place, for example the use of online services. I would also say that trust needs to be built with patients that if they use an online triage process/appointment booking that they will receive a timely response.”

Findings from Children and Young People

Unfortunately only 10 children and young people aged between 13 and 18 years old completed our survey. Given this low response, we would recommend that the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICB looks to undertake specific engagement with children and young people about their experiences of accessing GP services.

Across the respondents, 50% said they have never accessed their GP practice before. For all of these respondents, this is because their parent or guardian contacts the GP practice for them.

For the 50% of respondents who had accessed their GP practice, the majority had a positive experience. The greatest barrier was choice, with almost all respondents not offered any choice when making an appointment.

“I was given an appointment but they told me the day and time.”

“The appointment was too far away and too long to wait.”

When asked how accessing their GP practice could be improved, as emphasised amongst parents and carers, children and young people would also like to be able to book appointments using an online system.

“Let us have online access to book appointments.”

“Be better to make an appointment online than call.”

Respondents also noted that there should be more information about consent, and when children and young people are able to, or need to, contact their GP practice independently. For example, one respondent shared that they did not know that their parent could not contact their GP practice on their behalf because they are over 16 years old.

“I didn't know you have to ring yourself if you're over 16. My mum rang at first and I had to try again so I missed out on a same day appointment.”

As we found with parents and carers, 50% of children and young people said they have avoided contacting their GP practice in the last 12 months. For the majority, this is because they find their GP practice too difficult to access, or because they are concerned about being a burden on the NHS.

When asked about online services, 38% of respondents said they do not have access to online services. For all respondents, this is because they did not know they could have their own account. However, all respondents said they would use online services if they were given the opportunity and/or support to do so.

38% of children and young people do have access to online services, and when asked about the benefits of using online services, all respondents noted that it is much easier and quicker than contacting by telephone.

"You don't have to wait in a queue on the phone."

"It is easier than calling sometimes."

"You get help quicker than waiting on a phone."

When asked how online services could be improved, respondents said that the online forms can be confusing and difficult to complete.

"Takes ages to do the online form. Options are so limited it's hard to explain what's wrong to get an appointment."

"I can't fill in the online forms to get an appointment as they are too long, too complicated and I don't understand lots of the questions. I need to speak to people to understand things."

Respondents also shared that certain appointments, such as for contraception, cannot be booked online. Children and young people said they would like this to be an option, instead of having to contact the GP practice by telephone.

"You can't book contraception appointments online as a child, it's not an option, only for adults."

"Couldn't book my regular contraception injection online even though I am over 16. Have to spend an hour on the phone instead to book."

Summary

Our engagement shows that the majority of parents and carers are struggling to access GP services for their child or the young person they care for. Access is particularly difficult via

telephone, with many parents and carers spending hours trying to get an appointment for their child or the young person they care for, only to be told there are no appointments available, even weeks in advance.

Choice, especially in the type of appointment offered, is a priority for parents and carers. The findings highlight clear cases in which the child or young person should have been given this choice when making the appointment, whether that be due to their age, condition(s) or the severity of their symptoms. Babies and young children, and those with complex needs, disabilities, long-term conditions or mental ill health are at greater risk with reports of misdiagnosis, poor quality of care, or the parent or carer having to take their child or the young person they care for elsewhere to get the medical attention they need. This emphasises the importance of the concerns of the parent or carer being listened to, so the needs of the child or young person can be addressed.

Difficulties in contacting the GP practice and previous poor experiences with reception staff and/or healthcare professionals is encouraging parents and carers to avoid accessing GP services entirely for their child or the young person they care for. Instead, parents and carers are opting to visit an Urgent Care Centre or A&E – often because this route is easier to access rather than being the preferred option– or even paying for a private GP in efforts to get the support their child or the young person they care for requires.

Parents and carers also want online services to be utilised further, with the ability to book appointments online seen as essential for many. Surprisingly, many parents and carers are not aware that they can use online services for their child or the young person they care for, and most would access this if made available to them.

It is important to recognise that the challenges faced by GP practices across the county are significant. However, it is evident that most of the improvements parents and carers want to see are about the process of making an appointment, and easier access to their GP practice, rather than improving the quality of care their child or the young person they care for received. It is clear that some systems currently in place are not designed to meet patient needs and the adoption of improved systems was seen very positively by respondents.

Recommendations

Based on the findings outlined in this report, it is recommended that the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICB Primary Care Workstream should encourage GP practices to take forward the following recommendations. The ICB is providing welcome support to enable GP practices to improve access and the continuation of this will help address some of the challenges.

Improving access to GP services would instil greater confidence in patients. This could be achieved through:

1. Enabling a variety of access routes, including the use of online services and visiting the GP practice in person, to accompany all needs and preferences.
2. Continuing to improve telephone systems to reduce delays and waiting times for patients.
3. Greater flexibility in contact hours and opening times to account for school hours, work, and caring responsibilities.

Making appointments more readily available is important, particularly for children and young people and vulnerable groups. This includes:

4. Appointments that are bookable in advance, especially if the concern is either routine or non-urgent.
5. Reviewing and addressing waiting times for appointments, with particular consideration given to:
 - Children and young people
 - Those with a disability, complex needs, or a long-term condition
 - Those with ill mental health

Providing greater choice when offering appointments would improve the quality of care received. This includes:

6. Being mindful of work and caring responsibilities, as well as school hours, when offering appointments.
7. Providing more choice when offering appointments to patients, with a particular focus on offering more face to face appointments where possible. Specific consideration and greater choice should be given to:
 - Children and young people
 - Those with a disability, complex needs, or a long-term condition
 - Those with ill mental health

8. The ICB should work with Primary Care Networks and GP practices to identify ways of ensuring there is greater choice for patients.

Providing high quality of care would ensure all patients feel respected and heard. This includes:

9. Listening to and respecting the concerns of all patients, particularly parents and carers, to prevent misdiagnosis and/or mistreatment.
10. Providing thorough assessments and high quality care to all patients, at all times.
11. Healthcare professionals and reception staff to treat all patients with respect. This should be monitored to ensure staff are not dismissing concerns, or judging patients for making contact. Reminders and refresher training should also be considered.
12. Delivering Customer Care training for GP receptionists to improve their customer service and communication skills.

GP practices should offer greater information and support, particularly in regards to the use of online services. This includes:

13. Continuing to encourage patients, particularly parents and carers and vulnerable groups, to contact their GP practice if they have concerns about their health.
14. Enabling parents and carers online access for their child or the young person they care for, if this function is not already available.
15. Continuing to increase awareness amongst parents and carers on how they can access online services for their child or the young person they care for, and encourage or support them to register. The ICB should encourage GP practices to work with other healthcare professionals, Hertfordshire County Council and the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector to raise the profile and benefits of using online services.
16. Enabling all patients full access to the functions available via online services, including:
 - Booking appointments
 - Test results
 - Prescriptions
 - Medical records
17. By 1st November 2022 all GP practices should have updated their organisation settings for online services in order to be able to provide record access to patients – whether this be

via the NHS App, TPP or EMIS systems⁸. The ICS should look to review and monitor whether improvements have been made.

⁸ [GP Online Services clinical system configuration: Immediate action required - NHS Digital](#)

Appendix

Named GP Practices: Parents, Carers and Children and Young People Survey⁹

District	Name of GP Practice	Number of Respondents
Broxbourne	Warden Lodge Medical Centre	5
	The Maples Medical Centre	5
	Park Lane Surgery	4
	Amwell Surgery	4
	Cuffley Village Surgery	2
	Stanhope Surgery	1
Dacorum	Parkwood Surgery	5
	Fernville Surgery	4
	Bennetts End Surgery	3
	Haverfield Surgery	2
	Everest House Surgery	1
	Lincoln House Surgery	1
	Highfield Surgery	1
	Woodhall Farm Medical Centre	1
	Manor Street Surgery	1
	Gossoms End Surgery	1
East Herts	Church Street Surgery	18
	South Street Surgery	11
	Castlegate Surgery	4
	Dolphin House Surgery	3
	Hanscombe House Surgery	3
	Buntingford Medical Surgery	3
	New River Health (Castlegate Surgery and Church Street Surgery)	2
	Watton Place Clinic	2
	Knebworth and Marymead Surgery	2
	Elsenham Surgery	2
	Central Surgery	1
Hertsmere	Manor View Practice	3
	Theobald Medical Practice	1
North Herts	Birchwood Surgery	6
	Nevels Road Surgery	4
	Sollershott Surgery	2
	Bancroft Medical Centre	2
	Orford Lodge Surgery	2
	Royston Health Centre	2

⁹ Please note that the total does not equal to the total number of respondents due to some respondents choosing not to share the name of the GP practice their child or the young person they care for is registered with.

	Regal Chambers Surgery	1
St. Albans	The Maltings Surgery	9
	Harvey Group Practice (Harvey House Surgery and Jersey Farm Surgery)	7
	Parkbury House	6
	Summerfield Health Centre	4
	The Lodge Surgery	3
	The Lodge Health Partnership	3
	The Village Surgery	3
	The Elms Medical Practice	2
	Midway Surgery	1
	Hatfield Road Surgery	1
	Davenport Surgery	1
	Redbourn Health Centre	1
	Grange Street Surgery	1
Stevenage	Chells Surgery	3
	Stanmore Medical Group	3
	Shephall Health Centre	3
	The Poplars Surgery	1
	Symonds Green Health Centre	1
	King George Surgery	1
Three Rivers	Vine House Health Centre	5
	New Road Surgery	4
	Gade Surgery	1
Watford	Manor View Practice	5
	Bridgewater Surgery	3
	Watford Health Centre	2
	Sheepcot Medical Centre	1
	Garston Medical Centre	1
	Coach House Surgery	1
	Suthergrey House Medical Centre	1
Welwyn Hatfield	The Garden City Practice	8
	Bridge Cottage Surgery	4
	Hall Grove Group Practice	3
	Spring House Medical Centre	2
	Peartree Lane Surgery	2
	Burvill House Surgery	1
	Moors Walk Surgery	1
	Parkway Surgery	1
	Potterells Medical Centre	1