

Experiences of accessing GP practices 2024/25

(Changes to primary care access in Wandsworth)



Acknowledgements

We would like to give thanks to all individuals and organisations that were involved in this project.

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Disclaimer

Please note that our findings in this report relate to observations taken from individual members of the public and GP practice staff as well as quantitative data from a variety of surveys and questionnaires. It should not be taken as a representative portrayal of the views and/or experiences of all Wandsworth GP patients and staff.

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Report summary

Background

In 2024, based on feedback from local people, Healthwatch Wandsworth, as the independent champion for users of health and social care, chose to create a project focused on understanding patient experience of access to primary care, focusing on GP practices.

According to the [King's Fund](#), *'Despite recent efforts to make it more straightforward for patients to book an appointment, less than half of patients found it easy to contact their practice via phone, app or website, and more than a third (34%) said they had to wait too long for their appointment.'*

[Research](#) goes on to show that people facing certain health inequalities are more likely to find it difficult to access care.

At Healthwatch Wandsworth, we wanted to understand why it could be difficult for some people to access their GP practice and to make recommendations that influence change.

Our Findings

We spoke to 47 patients registered with Wandsworth GP practices and staff from 6 different practices within the borough. We also analysed other relevant data sources including the 2024 and 2025 National GP Patient Survey, NHS App data and the Healthwatch SWL Accessible Information Standard (AIS) project. From these a number of themes emerged relevant to Wandsworth patients' experiences of accessing GP practices. We found that even within the large themes we identified there was a great variation in patient experiences and opinions. As a result, we would recommend you read the section called 'Our findings' (page 9) for a more detailed breakdown of the themes below.

Patient satisfaction with GP practices

Our findings indicate that while not every experience with GP practices is straightforward or positive, the large majority of those in Wandsworth that have shared their experience through national and local surveys are satisfied with their experience of primary care. While many respondents indicated overall satisfaction with their GP practice there were instances of dissatisfaction with various aspects such as waiting times and being able to contact the practice with ease.

Varied approaches to accessing GP practices

A major theme that emerged is that the way patients attempt to contact their GP practice still varies greatly. As seen by the National GP Patient Survey there has been a clear increase in the use of online methods for contacting their practice.¹ Nevertheless, the traditional methods of phoning up or walking in person to the practice in order to get support are still used by a substantial percentage of people across the borough.² We also found that not all patients were aware that their practice carried out triage or total triage for support and appointments and what this meant. In addition, we found that while use of online forms has been growing as a preferred method for contacting the GP practice, usage of the NHS App for this remains low with patients telling us that they found the unclear wording around contacting the practice a barrier to using it.

Use of the Accessible Information Standard (AIS) and patient choice

A concern expressed by patients we spoke to was that the increasing digitisation of primary care would lead to them being left behind if they did not have the skills to use these forms of access. There was a fear that even those who had expressed that they have certain accessibility and communication needs would not have their preferences honoured by practices. [The Healthwatch South West London Accessible Information Standard project](#) indicated that, while most GP staff had some level of awareness of the AIS, the way the practice implemented and followed it varied greatly. Patients also indicated concern that the way practices were operating had led to a reduction in their ability to make choices regarding their care and/or to voice their concerns. This primarily concerned dissatisfaction with triage, its associated wait times and the inability to see a specific member of staff at the appointment. In addition, we found that the utilisation and effectiveness of Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) to help patients have their voice heard varied greatly between practices.

Our Recommendations

As a result of speaking to Wandsworth GP practice staff and patients as well as the many other projects and data sets we evaluated, we have **four key recommendations** for improving Wandsworth patients' experience and confidence in accessing GP practices.

¹ National GP Patient Survey 2024 <https://tinyurl.com/bddb33kj> & National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

² National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

1. Place continued importance on equity of access

- Practices should reassure patients that there will always be multiple ways to access their GP practice including non-online methods for those who need them.
- Practices should ensure that the [Accessible Information Standard](#) is followed fully by staff and that patients are made fully aware of what is covered by the standard.
- Patients' communication preferences, including those who are not covered by the AIS but who cannot use the online form, should be flagged and logged on systems and understood by all relevant staff to avoid patients repeating these needs more than once.
- Practices should move towards implementing call back capabilities on their phonenumber if not already in place to allow more flexibility for those patients who need to contact the practice via phone.
- Healthwatch Wandsworth could work with practice staff to outline how patients can get the most out of online forms of access.
- Healthwatch Wandsworth and GP practice staff should work with organisations who design and run triage tools, such as Accurx and eConsult, to ensure multiple languages are available on practice online forms to ensure equity of access to registered patients who speak English as a second language or have limited knowledge of English.³

2. Make online forms of access as straightforward as possible

- We would call for the NHS Digital Transformation team and practice staff to feedback to the NHS App team the difficulties patient's face in being confident in using the app. Staff should call for a simplification and standardisation of language on the NHS App to allow users to contact their GP practice via the app with ease.⁴
- We would also suggest GP practices to audit their websites using the [2023 NHS England GP website benchmarking and improvement tool](#) to improve their usability for patients.

³ Accurx: Patient Triage: Translation <https://tinyurl.com/yrj2up87>

⁴ NHS App Roadmap <https://digital.nhs.uk/services/nhs-app/roadmap>

3. Ensure there is a consistent standard of Patient Participation Groups across all practices in the Borough

- Practices need to work closely with existing members of their PPGs to communicate how their group can serve as an effective way for receiving feedback and providing vital information to registered patients.
- We would also recommend practices consider implementing a PCN wide PPG that meets less frequently. As practices with a PCN work closely together key information could be shared that is relevant to all patients within the PCN.

4. Better, clearer and more concise messaging at a local and national level to empower patients

- All relevant stakeholders including Healthwatch Wandsworth, GP practice staff, PPGs need to work together to ensure patients know about how access to primary care has changed and what it means to them.
- Patients should always be clearly informed in communications about what type of professional they are seeing and why the practice has deemed that person the appropriate professional for them to see.
- In addition, practices who offer telephone appointments should make it clear to patients that they have a choice to request a face to face interaction/appointment.
- The creation and publication of a patient charter by NHS England as part of the 2025/26 GP Contract should be displayed on practice websites and within their practice would help to empower patients of what they can expect from their GP.⁵

Conclusion

Healthwatch Wandsworth hopes that GPs, Primary Care Networks (PCNs) and other primary care staff and providers will take on board our four key recommendations. These recommendations are based upon what we have heard from Wandsworth residents, GP staff and voluntary organisations, combined with other data sources. We look forward to following up with relevant stakeholders as the new 2025/26 GP Contract comes into effect later this year as there are many elements of the contract that will support the recommendations.

⁵ Changes to the GP Contract in 2025/26 <https://tinyurl.com/4vy3fa6b>

1. Introduction

1.1 About Healthwatch Wandsworth

Healthwatch Wandsworth (HWW) is the patient and public champion for health and social care services. We send our reports to Healthwatch England to have an influence at a national level. HWW is funded by the Department of Health through Wandsworth Borough Council.

Our staff and volunteers are managed by an independent local voluntary organisation, Wandsworth Care Alliance (WCA). HWW is governed by a committee consisting of Trustees of WCA and members directly elected by the community.

To decide on where to focus our work we look at what people have told us when sharing experiences with us. We speak to local health and care decision makers to hear about their plans to develop services and we use information on local health data to set our priorities.

1.2 Identifying the project focus

In 2024, Healthwatch Wandsworth gathered public feedback which highlighted that patient experience of GP practices in the borough was highly varied with some individuals having issues with differing elements of accessing primary care. This included issues with waiting times, contacting the practice, utilising digital healthcare applications and feeling uninformed about how primary care was changing.

From June to November 2024, we reached out to and held discussions with various stakeholders to understand what elements of accessing primary care were an issue. We spoke with local voluntary organisations who raised concerns about the issues some of their users/clients face in accessing primary care. We also spoke with the local NHS Digital care coordinator about the work they were doing to raise the profile of the NHS App and the issues they were encountering when speaking to patients.

As a result, we decided to create a project focused on understanding people's experiences of accessing their GP practice and what issues they faced. By speaking with both patients, GP practice staff and other relevant stakeholders we wanted to provide recommendations to influence change.

This decision was made as the topic allows us at Healthwatch Wandsworth to:

- ✓ Impact a large number of people, or have a very significant impact on a smaller number of people
- ✓ Reflect an issue raised by a large number of people
- ✓ Make a significant difference or impact
- ✓ Reflect Healthwatch priorities or the priorities and timescales of other strategic local commissioners, providers and organisations
- ✓ Highlight gaps in service delivery or the voice of local people that is not being considered
- ✓ Give voice to an issue that affects people who are less likely to be heard or highlights the experiences of excluded communities on challenging issues that may disproportionately affect people with protected characteristics, creating or perpetuating health inequalities
- ✓ Make use of our resources and capacity

1.3 Our sources

Between July and December 2024, we conducted discussions with Wandsworth GP practice patients and staff.

We spoke directly with 47 patients who were registered with GP practices in Wandsworth. As a result, we heard about the patient experience of 22 of the 38 practices in the borough. We also spoke with staff at six different practices in Wandsworth as well as staff at Accurx and the South West London NHS Digital Transformation Team.

We have combined the findings from our own research with several other data sources which have allowed us to build a more complete picture of the situation of primary care in the Borough of Wandsworth for both patients and staff. As a result, this report will reference:

- The **2024 National GP Patient Survey** by Ipsos on behalf of NHS England – 3,775 respondents in Wandsworth
- The **2025 National GP Patient Survey** by Ipsos on behalf of NHS England – 4,006 respondents in Wandsworth
- **Accurx Survey** – 954 respondents in Wandsworth April–July 2024
- **Friends & Family Surveys** from 3 different practices in Wandsworth

- **Healthwatch SWL Accessible Information Standard project** – 144 responses from patients and carers and 82 responses from GP staff across South West London – 2024
- The **Wandsworth Community Health Needs Assessment** conducted by Wandsworth Council (which included specific questions related to primary care as part of our collaboration) – 238 respondents September–October 2024
- **NHS App data** for Wandsworth – covering the last 5 years
- **NHS SWL ICB Winter Engagement Fund** – 350 activities reaching 10,000 residents across South West London – October 2024–February 2025

2. Our findings

We have identified several themes that are relevant to many Wandsworth patients' experience of accessing their GP practice. Our findings indicate that there is a mixed experiences of accessing GP practices in Wandsworth. This not only because individual patients have differing requests and needs, but also because the 38 practices and the nine Primary Care Networks (PCNs) in which they are grouped operate in varying ways. While there is a move towards a more coordinated approach to primary care from the 38 practices; with the growing implementation of [total triage](#), the widespread use of online forms, and utilisation of the NHS App, there remain differences in approach which makes it difficult for our findings and themes to reflect the situation of every GP practice within Wandsworth. Nevertheless, the following are themes which are common across the many practices within the borough.

2.1 Patient satisfaction with GP practices

Our focus on patient access to GP practices in Wandsworth as a project was guided by issues patients were raising with us around waiting times for appointments, the ability to contact their GP practice with ease, and concerns over continuity of care at a local level, which has been echoed largely at a national level as well.⁶ Our findings indicate that while not every patient's experience with their GP practice is straightforward or positive, the large majority of those in Wandsworth that have shared their voice through national and local surveys are satisfied with the overall experience. While many respondents indicated overall satisfaction with their GP practice there were instances of

⁶ Public satisfaction with NHS at lowest ever level, survey shows <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-68669866>

dissatisfaction with various aspects such as waiting times and being able to contact the practice with ease.

2.1.1 Overall satisfaction

The 2024 and 2025 National GP Patient Surveys, conducted by Ipsos, indicated that in both years 82% of respondents in Wandsworth stated they had a good overall experience of their GP practice, sitting above the national average of 74% and 75.4% in 2024 and 2025 respectively.⁷ However, in 2024 the range of overall satisfaction with GP practices in Wandsworth varied between 55% and 96% and while this reduced in 2025 to between 64% and 98%, it does indicate that there is still a large discrepancy between practices in the borough in regard to patient satisfaction.⁸ However, the positive trend from 2024 to 2025 does seem to indicate that the overall experience of GP practices in the borough is becoming less varied. While the National GP Patient Surveys data indicates that the majority of patients are satisfied with their practice we must also acknowledge that the number of responses received is only equivalent to 1.2% of the population of Wandsworth.⁹ Furthermore, the Wandsworth Council Community Needs Assessment which gathered 238 responses from largely more deprived areas in the borough indicated a lower satisfaction with GP practices with only 68% responding positively.¹⁰

While data therefore indicates that respondents overall experience of GP practices in Wandsworth are largely positive, there were aspects of the GP practice experience that were less positive.

2.1.2 Satisfaction with waiting times for an appointment

A criticism common in national media and from residents regarding GP practices in recent years has been the long waiting times to have an appointment.¹¹ It must be acknowledged that this is associated with non-urgent appointments for which the target since 2022 has been to be seen within 2 weeks after the initial request.¹² While the National GP Patient Survey indicates that 73% of patients at GP practices in Wandsworth were seen within 2 weeks in 2024, increasing to 84% in 2025, there is clearly a disconnect between what GP practices and staff see as acceptable waiting time lengths and what patients want.¹³ This is indicated by the fact that, while the majority of respondents stated

⁷ National GP Patient Survey 2024 <https://tinyurl.com/bddb33kj> & National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Closing the Gap – A qualitative community health and wellbeing needs assessment for Wandsworth's under-served communities

¹¹ Public satisfaction with NHS at lowest ever level, survey shows <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-68669866>

¹² New plan to make it easier for patients to see their GP <https://tinyurl.com/3jh3fwue>

¹³ National GP Patient Survey 2024 <https://tinyurl.com/bddb33kj> & National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

they were satisfied with the wait times, 29% and 27% of respondents, in 2024 and 2025 respectively, felt that it took too long to be seen by their GP practice after submitting an appointment request.¹⁴

This disconnect seems to be a result of the shift in the way primary care is now operating with total triage. This means that patients are now meant to be given an appointment or support in relation to the severity of their issue rather than on the basis of who can reserve an appointment slot first.¹⁵ The lack of understanding around how this system works from patients has meant that waiting times for non-urgent appointments continue to be a common source of dissatisfaction. In addition, there remain differing views amongst residents towards the use and introduction of triaging by GP practices with Wandsworth Council's Community Needs Assessment highlighting that a considerable number of residents in Roehampton were against the introduction of this system at their practice.¹⁶

2.1.3 Satisfaction with contacting the GP practice

Another issue of contention that led us to focus on this project was the difficulty patients reported in contacting their GP practice. The 2024 GP Survey showed that nationally less than half of patients found it easy to contact their practice via phone, app or website.¹⁷ This was also reiterated by the patients we spoke to, who often highlighted challenges with GP practice booking systems including confusion regarding online forms, long phone waiting times, or reception staff who did not understand their communication and/or accessibility needs.

In regards to the various different methods of contacting the practice respondents to the 2024 National GP Patient Survey had a 75% satisfaction rate with contacting their GP practice overall, but only 55% found contacting the practice through the website easy, and for the NHS App it was only 53%.¹⁸ These were both much lower than the 66% of respondents who indicated that they found contacting the GP practice via phone easy.¹⁹ Nevertheless, in 2025 the data shows that residents are increasingly finding contacting their GP practice via online methods simpler, with 61% of respondents stating that they found using the website easy, and 56% of respondents saying the same for the NHS App.²⁰ Furthermore, between 2024 and 2025 there was a major reduction in patients

¹⁴ National GP Patient Survey 2024 <https://tinyurl.com/bddb33kj> & National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>.

¹⁵ Accurx: Total triage: what it is and how it helps <https://www accurx.com/total-triage>

¹⁶ Closing the Gap – A qualitative community health and wellbeing needs assessment for Wandsworth's under-served communities

¹⁷ The King's Fund responds to latest GP Patient Survey <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/press-releases/latest-gp-patient-survey>

¹⁸ National GP Patient Survey 2024 <https://tinyurl.com/bddb33kj>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

phoning the practice as their primary way to contact the GP practice, dropping from 63% down to 48%, on the contrary online methods rose from 23% to 36% as the primary way to contact the practice.²¹ These trends indicate that while there is increasing use of online methods to contact GP practices their user interfaces may need to be more intuitive to increase patient satisfaction with these methods. It must also be remembered that respondents to the National GP Patient Survey make up a small percentage of the population of Wandsworth. They are naturally more likely to feel confident in using digital tools as they took part in an online survey. Therefore, these numbers could be seen as slightly skewed to representing those who face less barriers in using online methods.

2.2 Varied approaches to accessing GP practices

As seen by the National GP Patient Survey there has been a clear increase in the use of online methods by patients for contacting their practice.²² Nevertheless, the traditional methods of phoning up or going in person to the practice to get an appointment are still used by a substantial percentage (63%) of the borough.²³ What makes this interesting is that for practices operating a total triage model those who phone up are often redirected to go through the same process as those who request support via the practice's online form.²⁴ Reception staff at various practices acknowledged that often if someone calls over the phone they are told that they will be sent a link to the online form in order to submit their request. In addition, staff said that there is still a belief by some patients that by calling the reception directly they will skip the queue and be given an appointment quicker than if they submitted an online request. Staff reiterated that this is not the case in a practice operating total triage and that all requests, however they are submitted, are triaged according to need via the same system.²⁵

2.2.1 Patient knowledge of practice triaging

While a substantial percentage of people using phone calls (48%) to request support from their GP practice can be partially attributed to a misunderstanding from patients over how a triage system operates, it must be remembered that the phone remains an important option for those who are unable to use online methods or for those who need a two-way conversation.²⁶ Some GP practice staff told us this is why they push for the majority of patients use online methods for contacting the GP practice, as it allows the reception team to handle calls

²¹ National GP Patient Survey 2024 <https://tinyurl.com/bddb33kj> & National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

²² Ibid.

²³ National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

²⁴ Accurx: Total triage: what it is and how it helps <https://www accurx.com/total-triage>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

from patients who need assistance via the phone or in person. Patients who are assisted over the phone or in person at a practice that is operating a total triage system are not at an advantage of getting an appointment quicker as the reception team is simply doing the job of filling out an online form on the patient's behalf.²⁷ The request is then triaged in the same way as any other request submitted via the NHS App or online form and looked at by a medical professional, in most cases a GP, and prioritised according to need.

Where the concern lies with this approach is that patients we spoke to who have struggled with using the online form feel that their needs are not noted down by the staff and that they must reiterate that they cannot fill out the online form themselves. In addition, the non-standardisation of GP practice websites in the borough regarding how many clicks it takes to get to the online form may be contributing to some patients not feeling confident in utilising this method of access. The creation of a [GP website benchmarking and improvement tool](#) by NHS England in 2023 offers practice staff to audit their practice website against a standard which is seen to improve the usability of key patient web journeys.

If practices can ensure that patients who need assistance are logged and flagged in the system, this would allow the reception team to feel confident that they are assisting those who need support.

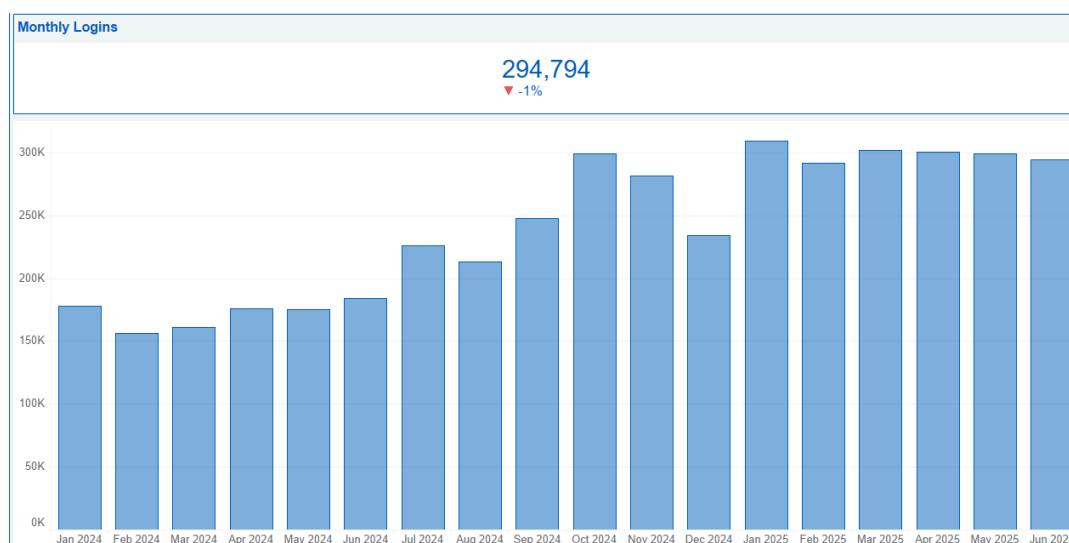
2.2.2 Use of NHS App for appointment requests

Another interesting discussion around how patients access primary care is the role that the NHS App has currently and will have in the future. While 65% of patients registered at practices in Wandsworth are registered with the NHS App it, is only used by 10% of patients as the primary way for requesting support from their practice. The app is often more frequently used by patients to check appointment times and locations, medical letters, test results, order repeat prescriptions, and also to cancel appointments. Usage for requesting repeat prescriptions via the NHS App is continuing to see more use in Wandsworth in comparison to online forms or Patient Access which also offer a route to request repeat prescriptions. This is partly due to the fact that the forms on many practice websites recommend that patients use the NHS App instead to request their repeat prescription.²⁸ The NHS App's continued use for cancelling appointments is also not a surprise given that this can be done with the click of a button on the NHS App rather than having to email or phone up the GP practice and wait for a confirmation of cancellation. This indicates that while the NHS App is increasingly used by Wandsworth patients, with monthly logins significantly increasing between 2024 and 2025, it does not have a strong

²⁷ Accurx: Total triage: what it is and how it helps <https://www accurx.com/total-triage>

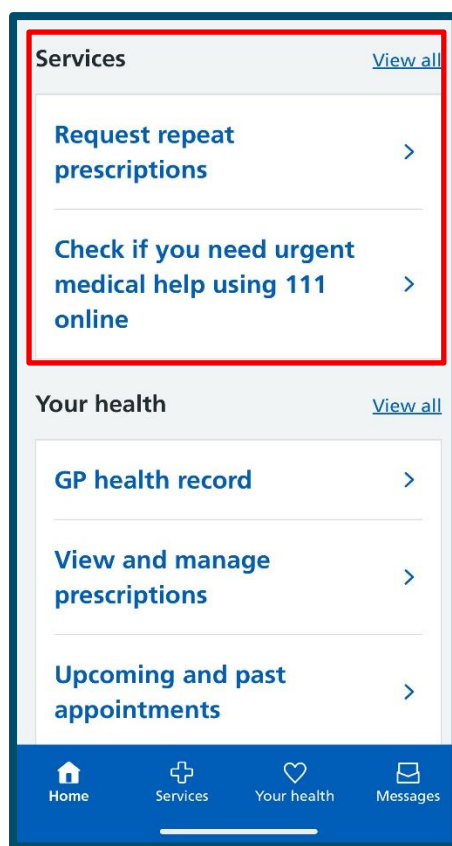
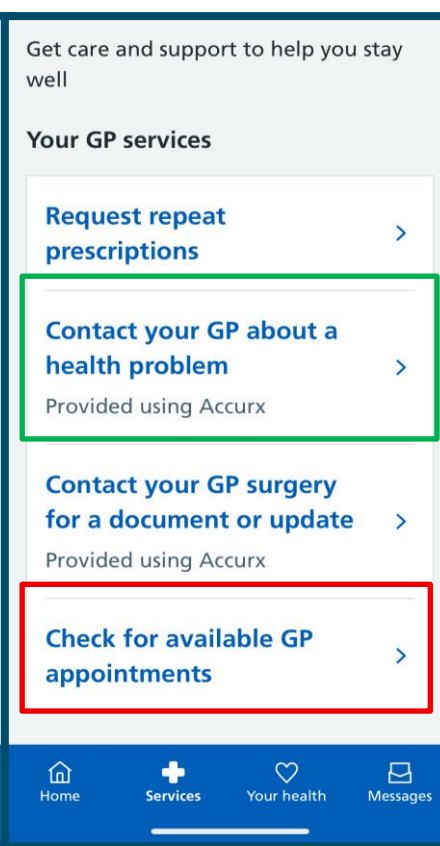
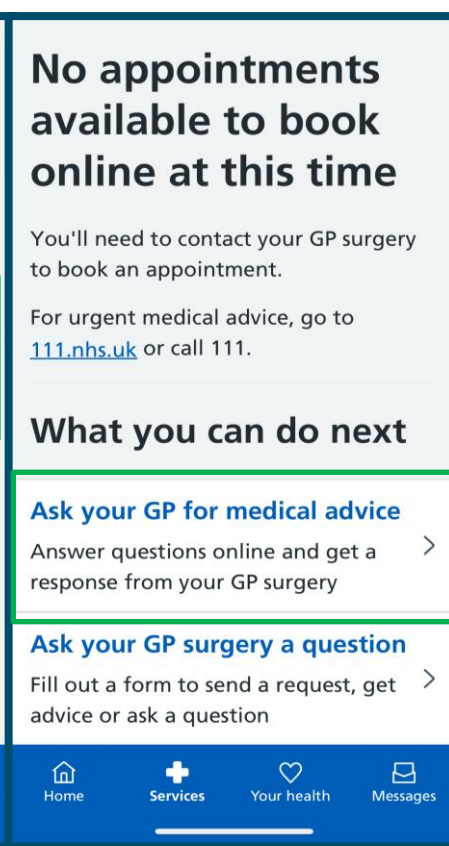
²⁸ Accurx: Patient Triage: How to manage your repeat prescription settings <https://tinyurl.com/nbhe6efy>

association for patients as a method to request primary care support from the GP practice.



Monthly logins on the NHS App by Wandsworth GP practice patients from 01/01/2024 to 30/06/2025

One potential reason for this is due to the confusing wording on the NHS App around requesting support from a GP practice which often will lead to an appointment. A range of patients, GP practice staff, and the NHS Digital Transformation team all highlighted this as an issue. The issue lies with the fact that if you are registered with a GP practice operating total triage you have to request an appointment via the ***“Contact your GP about a health problem”*** option rather than the ***“Check for available GP appointments”*** option. This has led to a lot of confusion from patients especially because clicking on the appointments option leads to a screen stating that there are ***“No appointments available to book online at this time”***. While this page does state that you have to contact the GP practice to request an appointment, the buttons below to do this uses different wording again, with the option ***“Ask your GP for medical advice”*** redirecting to the same form as the ***“Contact your GP about a health problem”*** option on the previous page. While this wording is used to indicate that by filling out the form you will not always be given an appointment, it is still not clear that this is the way most appointments will be assigned when a GP practice is operating total triage. The lack of consistent wording makes it confusing for users of the NHS App to know how to easily submit a request for support from the GP practice, as most people will default to selecting which ever option is labelled with the word ***appointments***, and this prevents them from being redirected to the correct form within the fewest number of clicks.

 <p>1. NHS App Home page – No direct option to request a GP appointment</p>	 <p>2. NHS App Services page – Wording is not clear of how to request an appointment</p>	 <p>3. NHS App Check for available GP appointments page – Wording is misleading that no appointments are available at the practice.</p>
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Improvements have been made to the NHS App since our initial research was carried out, with better integration of the online form now available in the app.²⁹ However the low use of the NHS App as a way to request GP support and the fact that only half of respondents stated that they found the app easy to use to contact their practice, indicates that there is more work needed in order to make the NHS App user friendly.³⁰

2.3 Accessible Information Standard and patient choice

A concern participants shared was that the increasing digitisation of primary care would leave them behind if they did not have the skills to use these forms of access. There was a fear that even those who had expressed that they have certain accessibility and communication needs would not have their preferences honoured by practices. These concerns closely aligned with a project carried out by Healthwatch in South West London around the [Delivery of](#)

²⁹ NHS App Roadmap <https://digital.nhs.uk/services/nhs-app/roadmap>

³⁰ National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

the Accessible Information Standard (AIS) in South West London GP practices.

This project looked to highlight how the Accessible Information Standard was being implemented in GP practices.

2.3.1 Implementation of the Accessible Information Standard

The Accessible Information Standard sets out how Health and Care services must meet the communication and information needs of people with certain disabilities. In relevant cases, it also covers carers and parents with disability, who support a person who may or may not be disabled. **Some examples of conditions covered under the Standard:**

- 1) Sensory loss (for example, vision or hearing)
- 2) Certain neurological conditions (for example Parkinson's disease)
- 3) People who are neurodiverse and/or have a learning disability (for example autism)

The project found that a large percentage of people with communication needs, 73%, did not know what the AIS was.³¹ This means there is a risk that patients are not aware that their communication and information needs have to be met by their practice as part of the AIS. In addition, 53% of respondents said they had to regularly repeat their communication needs to staff at the practice and pointed towards the importance of continuity of care to mitigate this.³² Respondents stated that they often need longer appointments to understand information or to express themselves and that time spent repeating their needs to new staff can take away from this. Staff said the system for flagging these needs can be overwhelming, as a lot of different flags can appear on a patient's record these then often get missed because of workflows and limited time in appointments.³³ GP staff also stated that while there had been some training about the AIS, if they could have further support, they would be able to accommodate patients' needs more effectively.³⁴ This could indicate that there are still issues within some GP practices about how they ensure that patients who are more likely to face issues in accessing primary care are supported properly.

2.3.2 Patient desire for continuity of care

While the AIS covers certain disabilities, staff acknowledgment of communication preferences with patients not covered by the standard was also a theme that

³¹ Healthwatch SWL: *The Delivery of the Accessible Information Standard in South West London GP Practices*

<https://tinyurl.com/27jkpnre>

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

emerged from our research. Some patients who chose to request an appointment by phoning the reception stated that they did not want to share details related to their medical enquiry with the reception team and wished to simply be booked in with a GP. Other patients expressed that while they were able to use the online form as their method of booking, they felt uncomfortable with the fact that they often do not get to have an open and two-way conversation with a medical professional during the process in which they can ask questions or request clarification. Others expressed disappointment when they were told that they would not be able to see their preferred GP.

When presented with these concerns practice staff stated that they strongly understand patients' desire for continuity of care, practices can even provide the option on the online form for patients to indicate their preference to be seen by a certain member of staff. However, they stated that it is not always feasible to honour this request as triage demands that acute issues are dealt with in a timely manner and the preferred member of staff may not be available. Nevertheless, they did state that when the medical issues concerned chronic/long-term conditions, they would always attempt to ensure continuity of care with a patient.

Regarding privacy concerns and communication issues the majority of practices we spoke to confirmed that enquiries submitted by patients are always looked at by a medical professional and in many instances GPs themselves. Practices also stated that if they felt there was a need for further information or clarification from the person's enquiry, they would attempt to speak to them over the phone before triaging the request. Ultimately, concerns around continuity of care and the desire to see a preferred member of staff by a sizeable number of patients indicates that there is still a disconnect between how patients understand triage to work, their preferences and the guidelines in which GP practice staff must operate to ensure requests are dealt with in a timely manner.

2.3.3 Dissatisfaction with waiting times

Dissatisfaction with the waiting times for an appointment was a common concern raised in discussions we had with patients. In addition, over a quarter of patients in the GP Patient Survey said the waiting times for non-urgent appointments were seen as too long.³⁵ Many patients we spoke to expressed that they felt their experience of accessing the GP had deteriorated since the COVID-19 pandemic. Patients expressed frustration that they could no longer call the practice and be given a same/next day appointment. The contrast between the pre-pandemic situation means the move to triage, which now sees patients

³⁵ National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

seen according to need but with up to a 2 week wait, has been met with some dissatisfaction.³⁶ Practice staff stated that it was hard to convey to registered patients that shifting to triage and managing requests according to need has been necessary due to reduced staff and the real-terms funding cuts they faced after the pandemic.³⁷ In addition, practice staff have also stated that they believe in the fairness of the triage model as the previous system of first come first served unfairly benefited those who had availability to call the practice at the start of its opening hours. This meant that often patients with more serious medical related issues would face a longer wait for an appointment than clinically safe. There are still of course concerns that the practices who operate a cap on the number of requests they can receive each day through triage tools like Accurx and eConsult, could mean that there is still a scramble to submit a request as early in the day as possible.

Regarding attitudes to triage and wait times, conversations with patients and practice staff suggest patients do become adjusted to the triage system and routine appointment wait times the longer the practice has implemented it.

2.3.4 Patient choice and patient voice

Another issue highlighted by our conversations were concerns over the weakening of a patient's voice and their entitlement to choice. Patient choice has already been addressed in this report in relation to how support and appointments are requested, the wait times, and the desire to see a specific GP. However, worries over patient choice expressed to us also touched on whether the appointment given was face to face or was over the phone, and if the appointment was with a member of staff that is not a GP. Regarding the strength of patient voice there were concerns over the varied role and impact Patient Participation Groups had at each practice.

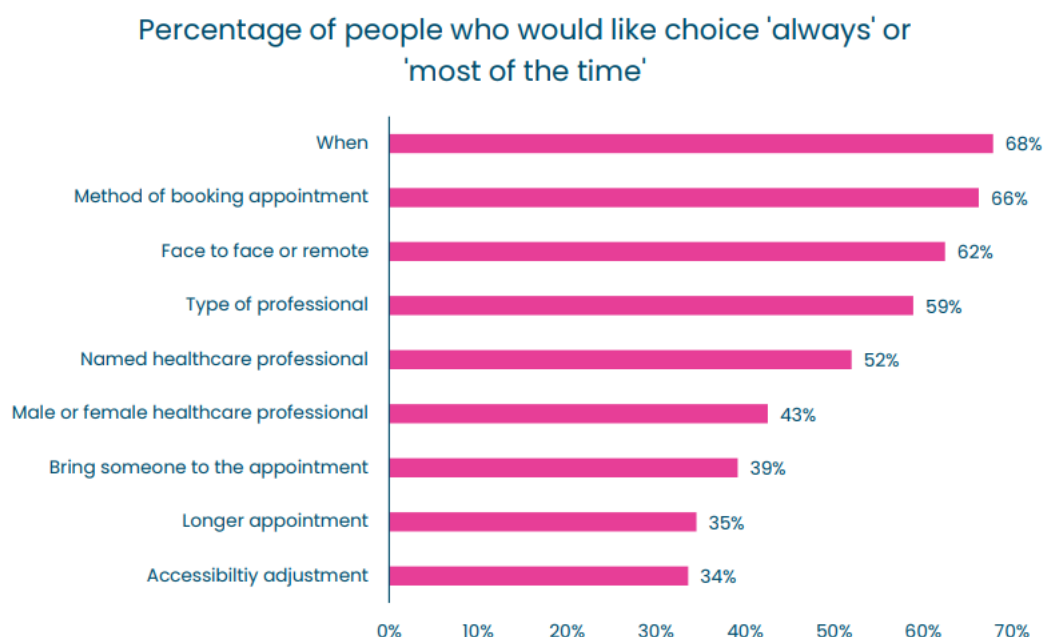
Phone appointments have been increasingly used by practices since the COVID-19 pandemic to deal efficiently with enquiries that staff feel can be addressed without a face to face appointment. NHS England data shows that in June 2023 57.8% of GP appointments in South West London took place face to face with 28.7% being via telephone and 11.6% via video conference.³⁸ While this indicates that the majority of appointments still take place face to face there are concerns from patients that they are often not informed that they have the choice to request a face to face appointment after being given a telephone appointment if they wish to, with only 12% of respondents in 2025 National GP Patient survey stating this was made clear to them when be given their last

³⁶ *New plan to make it easier for patients to see their GP* <https://tinyurl.com/3jh3fwue>

³⁷ *General practice funding saw 2.5% drop in real terms after Covid* <https://tinyurl.com/bdhfnx6s>

³⁸ *NHS England Appointments in General Practice* <https://tinyurl.com/yx9tnjj3>

appointment.³⁹ While practice staff stated that they would always try to honour a patient's request to be seen face to face, as this is part of the new GP Contract⁴⁰ which began in April 2025, there is clearly a large disconnect between this being possible and between patients being actively informed of this. Furthermore a 2025 report from Healthwatch England highlighted that 62% of respondents would like to be given the choice of face to face or remote always or most of the time.⁴¹



There have also been concerns from patients about their appointment not being with a General Practitioner but another member of staff. This primarily concerned the increasing role Physician Associates (PAs) have played within GP practice since 2022.⁴² Patient concerns around PAs were not confined to one aspect as some respondents took issue with their skills and training, others with the fact that they cannot prescribe medication, and others with the fact that they had simply not been informed that they were seeing a PA either prior to the appointment or even during.⁴³ While the 2025 National GP Patient Survey indicates that the most patient appointments still take place with a GP, followed by General Practice Nurse, the lack of clarity and choice surrounding PAs has caused a lot of concern.⁴⁴ This has led some patients to request that their practice that never give them an appointment with a PA, either due to the fact that they were not satisfied with the support they had received previously or due to the fact that they do not feel confident enough in their skills.⁴⁵

³⁹ National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

⁴⁰ Healthwatch England: The 'Choice Gap': Do patients get the choices they want in general practice? <https://tinyurl.com/h355pwwz>

⁴¹ Ibid. <https://tinyurl.com/h355pwwz>

⁴² Healthwatch England: Am I seeing a physician associate or a doctor? <https://tinyurl.com/y7c7ts7w>

⁴³ Department of Health and Social Care: The Leng Review <https://tinyurl.com/yp3t2s59>

⁴⁴ National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

⁴⁵ The Patients Association: Leng Review – Patients views and experiences of physician associates <https://tinyurl.com/4fx62crv>

Since the start of this project the debate over the role of PAs has led to an independent review, entitled [The Leng Review](#), commissioned by the Department of Health & Social Care and published in July 2025. This has led to the Department of Health & Social Care to put forward recommendations for the future which include: the renaming of Physician Associates to Physician Assistants to indicate their role as a supportive, complementary member of the medical team who will only see patients within their skill set, increased oversight by a senior clinician who will review their notes and sign off on any prescriptions, and a move towards making it clearer for patients to be able to identify physician assistants from doctors.⁴⁶ Healthwatch Wandsworth will be interested to monitor how these recommendations are implemented and the impact it has on patients' perceptions of PAs.

Regarding patient voice there were concerns from patients over the effectiveness of their Patient Participation Group to discuss with practice staff about what improvements need to be made. From speaking to patients and particularly PPG representatives of different practices it is clear that there is a large variation in the role PPGs play within their practice. While having a PPG is required as part of *The National Health Service (Personal Medical Services Agreements) Regulations 2015* we were told that there were instances of where the meeting of certain PPGs had been put on indefinite hold or where certain PPGs meet so infrequently that patients do not feel it is able to perform its functions.⁴⁷ On the contrary other practices have very active PPGs who meet frequently and often organise events or meetings which invite other registered patients to attend even if they are not part of the PPG itself. Practice staff also conveyed to us that in some cases they were pushing for a more active PPG but that it was difficult to find registered patients who had free time to commit to such activities.

3. Recommendations and Ideas for Improvement

As a result of speaking to Wandsworth GP practice staff and patients and analysis of insights from the many other projects and data sets we evaluated, we have put forward **four key recommendations** for improving Wandsworth patients' experience of using GP practices.

⁴⁶ Department of Health and Social Care: *The Leng Review* <https://tinyurl.com/yp3t2s59>

⁴⁷ *The National Health Service (Personal Medical Services Agreements) Regulations 2015* <https://tinyurl.com/hervtajk>

3.1 Place continued importance on equity of access

A large percentage of patients in Wandsworth still phone their GP practice as their primary way to request an appointment.⁴⁸ While this may decline as use of online forms and the NHS App for requesting appointments increases, as can already be seen in the differences between the 2024 and 2025 National GP Patient Surveys, there is a need for phone lines to remain a viable option for patients who do not feel online methods of access are suitable for them.⁴⁹ Some of the main worries from patients around the increasing digitisation of primary care is that traditional forms of access will cease to exist. In addition, some patients face barriers in accessing primary care due to particular communication needs which are sometimes not met by practices.

What we recommend

Practices should reassure patients that there will always be multiple ways to access their GP practices including non-online methods for those who need them. In addition and as per the new [GP Contract](#) the method patients use to access primary care should not impact their experience and it should continue to be equitable whether they walk in, phone up, or complete an online form.

Practices should ensure that the [Accessible Information Standard](#) is followed fully by staff and that patients are made aware of what is covered by the standard. The AIS has recently been updated in June 2025 and strengthened to ensure that NHS services put the standard into practice and assess how well they are meeting the standard.⁵⁰

Patient's communication preferences, including those who are not covered by the AIS but who cannot use the online form, should be flagged and logged on systems and understood by all relevant staff to avoid patients repeating these needs more than once.

Practices should move towards implementing call back capabilities on their phoneline if not already in place to allow more flexibility for those patients who need to contact the practice via phone. This system ideally would also be able to flag callers who have called and not been responded to by the practice.

Healthwatch Wandsworth could offer to work alongside the local NHS Digital Care Coordinator to further promote their work about how patients can get the most out of online methods of access such as the NHS App.

⁴⁸ National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

⁴⁹ National GP Patient Survey 2024 <https://tinyurl.com/bddb33kj> & National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

⁵⁰ Healthwatch England: The updated Accessible Information Standard is now available <https://tinyurl.com/sbexaj7>

Healthwatch Wandsworth and GP practice staff should work with triage tools such as Accurx and eConsult to ensure multiple languages are available on GP practice online forms to make access equitable for registered patients who have English as a second language or limited knowledge of English.⁵¹

Potential impact

By GP practices working with Healthwatch Wandsworth, patients, and other stakeholders to ensure that equity of access remains, trust with registered patients will increase as they feel supported in their communication and access preferences and that they will not be left behind by the changing nature of primary care.

Furthermore, if registered patients become more confident in using online methods of access and understand their benefits it will further free up the phone lines and the reception team's time to deal with patients who need assistance.

Implementing call back capabilities on the practice's phonenumber would further allow the reception team to manage patients' calls with ease and ensure that everyone is given adequate time to talk through their enquiry, and that patients who did not originally get through are not forgotten about.

Finally, by ensuring that online methods of access include appropriate language options and translation capabilities for those who may struggle with English, practices would be able to receive more detailed enquiries from those patients and understand the nature of the request better before potentially needing to request an interpreter.

3.2 Make online forms of access as straightforward as possible

Increasing digitisation of the NHS and primary care is no doubt here to stay. Digital tools are increasingly being utilised by care providers and there continues to be a push to have patients utilise online forms of access such as the NHS App and online forms. However, there are inconsistencies in these digital applications and confusion around wording and how to use them. This can put people off using them or make it difficult for those who struggle with digital skills to feel confident in using them.

The NHS App continues to have issues with its wording and the speed with which a user can get to the right page to request an appointment with their GP practice. This may explain why the app is not used as a primary method by

⁵¹ Accurx: Patient Triage: Translation <https://tinyurl.com/yrj2up87>

patients for requesting support from their GP practice.⁵² In addition, while many users have stated they find the online form simple to use, especially after using it multiple times, there are still issues with the form around wording, especially for those with weaker English skills. In addition, GP practice websites vary in how they direct patients to access the online form and there can be confusing wording that presents multiple ways to request an appointment on websites adds to this.

What we recommend

We would call for the NHS ICB Digital Transformation team and practice staff to feedback to the NHS App team the difficulties patients face in using the app to request GP practice support. Staff should call for a simplification and standardisation of language on the NHS App to allow users to access the appointment request form with ease.⁵³

We would also call on GP practices to audit their websites using the [2023 NHS England GP website benchmarking and improvement tool](#) to improve their usability for patients. The audit takes roughly between 45–90 minutes and would ensure that GP practice websites are as user friendly as possible. The large variation in GP practice websites makes it difficult to support GP communications with standardised advice to patients across Wandsworth as each practice has a different route to accessing the online form on their website.

Potential impact

By making the NHS App user friendly and simplifying the language, more patients would feel confident in using the app for a variety of features including requesting GP appointments. This would not only allow patients to have easier access to request an appointment but would also lead to a potential increase in uptake and use of the NHS App, as patients begin to use it as their go to portal for all health-related needs.

The standardisation of GP practice websites would also lead to registered patients feeling more confident to contact their practice via the online form on the website. This combined with greater NHS App usage for appointment requests would only further free up the phone lines and the reception team's time for dealing with patients who require assistance.

⁵² National GP Patient Survey 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/57ycabrw>

⁵³ NHS App Roadmap <https://digital.nhs.uk/services/nhs-app/roadmap>

3.3 Ensure there is a consistent standard of Patient Participation Groups across all practices in the Borough

Patient Participation Groups are valuable for both registered patients and practice staff. For patients it gives them a way to communicate effectively with staff about issues and concerns that impact patient experience. For practice staff it provides a space for the practice to provide important information to registered patients and get valuable feedback on what is working well for patients as well as what needs improvement. We found wide discrepancies between GP practices and the way their PPGs are utilised.

What we recommend

Practices need to work closely with existing members of their PPGs to communicate the desire for the group to serve as an effective method for receiving feedback and providing vital information to registered patients. The opportunity to be part of the PPG needs to be effectively advertised at all practices, within their premises and on their website. Practice staff should work with patients to create a format and frequency of meetings that works well for both sides.

We would also recommend practices to consider implementing a PCN wide PPG that meets less frequently. As practices within a PCN work closely together, key information could be shared that is relevant to all patients within the PCN. Working with patient groups for the benefit of patients is part of the contract Network Contract Directed Enhanced Service (Network Contract DES) that PCNs have been signed up to since 2019.⁵⁴

Potential impact

By ensuring a high standard of PPGs across the borough, patient satisfaction would increase as patients are given a way to communicate with practice staff. This would ensure that they feel respected and heard by the practice, making them feel empowered that they can work with staff to improve the experience for both sides. Having an effective PPG would also allow practice staff to be alerted to important patient feedback, both positive and constructive, providing insights into how they can potentially increase patient satisfaction with the practice and including advice on communications and access issues similar to those highlighted in this report. In addition, an effective PPG would encourage other

⁵⁴ NHS England: Network Contract DES Contract specification 2025/26 – PCN requirements and entitlements
<https://tinyurl.com/9z7jk9k7>

registered patients to join the group as they feel it is an effective way for them to communicate with practice staff.

3.4 Better, clearer and more concise messaging at a local and national level to empower patients

From our findings many of the issues regarding patient satisfaction with GP practices stem from the confusion or lack of understanding around the changing landscape of primary care and the way in which GP practices and their staff must operate. Negative experiences of interacting with GP practices can often remain more rooted in a patient's mind than positive experiences and this can lead to increasing dissatisfaction and frustration with the way their practice operates.

Many patients have also not been provided with clear information on their rights and choices when it comes to requesting an appointment. In addition, many told us that they still don't understand why they are not given a same day or next day appointment and why seeing the same medical specialist is not always feasible. This speaks to the lack of clear information that has been disseminated to patients about how triaging functions.

Patients are often not given a full explanation of the role specialised staff and Physician Associates play within a GP practice. Furthermore, on seeing these members of staff it is not always made clear that they are not speaking to a General Practitioner which can lead to distrust with the practice. Conversely when patients are informed and when staff explain why the practice is operating in a different way, they are more receptive and understanding of why they may not always be seeing a GP, or why their appointment is in more than a weeks' time. Trust is important to ensure that patients seek help from their practice and that this is done in a timely way to ensure better outcomes.

What we recommend

All relevant stakeholders including Healthwatch Wandsworth, GP practice staff, PPGs need to work together to inform patients about how access to primary care has changed and what it means to them.

Patients should always be clearly informed of which type of professional they are seeing and why the practice has deemed that person the appropriate professional for them to see.

In addition, practices who offer telephone appointments should strive to make it clear to patients that they have a choice to request a face to face appointment when it is appropriate.

The NHS, Government and national media need to provide clear information on the way primary care is currently and will operate in the future. The creation and publication of a patient charter by NHS England as part of the 2025/26 GP Contract, which would be displayed on practice websites and within their practice, would help to empower patients of what they can expect from their GP practices.⁵⁵

Potential impact

Building an open dialogue with patients and being more transparent about the way the practice operates would increase patient trust with staff, and ultimately patient satisfaction. Patients would understand why they are seen by staff other than a GP in certain circumstances and also feel empowered that they can request a face to face appointment or to see another member of staff if they feel it is appropriate. If patient-staff trust builds, there are chances for a better understanding about the concerns and priorities of both sides which would hopefully allow for the practice to work with patients to addresses them and more efficiently and effectively.

If the NHS, Government and national media are also able to convey clearly to the population the parameters in which GP practices and their staff have to operate, patients can more effectively find health care support with a better understanding of how they now need to access primary care and what they can and cannot request and choose.

Recommendations Conclusion

Healthwatch Wandsworth hopes that GPs, Primary Care Networks (PCNs) and other primary care staff and providers will take on board our four key recommendations. These recommendations are based upon what we have heard from Wandsworth residents, GP staff and voluntary organisations, combined with other data sources. We look forward to following up with relevant stakeholders as the new 2025/26 GP Contract comes into effect later this year.

⁵⁵ Changes to the GP Contract in 2025/26 <https://tinyurl.com/4vy3fa6b>

4. Become a Healthwatch Member

Make your voice heard in health and social care. Become a member today!

[Click here to become a Healthwatch Wandsworth member for free](#)

What do we offer our members?

We champion local voices, and tell you about:

- Events: where you can meet other people, share experiences, and talk to decision makers in health and care.
- Signposting: to free opportunities, services, and community events.
- Volunteering: to give back to the community.
- News: keeping you updated on the latest news.

Healthwatch is an independent champion for **your voice** in health and social care services.

5. Appendix

5.1 List of Acronyms and terms

- Accurx – NHS approved private triage and online consultation platform that facilitates communication between patients and healthcare professionals. Used by 98% of GP practices in the UK
- AIS – Accessible Information Standard – Sets out how providers and commissioners of NHS and publicly funded adult social care services should ensure disabled people and people with impairments or sensory loss can access and understand information and receive communication support. All organisations that provide publicly funded NHS care or adult social care must have regard to this standard
- eConsult – A digital triage and online consultation platform
- GP – General Practice/General Practitioner
- HSC – Health and Social Care
- HWW – Healthwatch Wandsworth
- ICB – Integrated Care Board
- NHS – National Health Service
- PCNs – Primary Care Networks – Primary Care Networks (PCNs) bring GP practices together with community, mental health, social care, pharmacy, hospital and voluntary services in their local areas. Every PCN is led by a clinical director who may be a GP, general practice nurse, clinical pharmacist or other clinical profession working in general practice

There are 9 PCNs in Wandsworth.

- PPGs – Patient Participation Groups – PPGs are generally made up of a group of volunteer patients, the practice manager and one or more of the GPs from a practice. PPGs meet on a regular basis to discuss the services on offer, and how improvements can be made for the benefit of patients and the practice.
- SWL – South West London
- Total Triage – A system of triage in which patients provide information – and are triaged – **before** any appointment is booked (if one is booked at

all). This enables a GP surgery to meet patients' needs outside of appointments and prioritise their limited capacity to support those most in need of care.

- WCA – Wandsworth Care Alliance

5.2 Question list for Wandsworth GP patients

Healthwatch Wandsworth is working on a project on accessing healthcare services. We're trying to understand how people are accessing primary care services- those are the 'point of call' people like your GP, local pharmacy, etc. We want to see what's going well, where the issues are, and how it can be improved. We will take notes on what you say. This will then go in our HSC survey anonymously.

1. What GP are you registered with?
2. How long have you been registered with that GP?
3. What approach do you use to access healthcare (online/phone/NHS app)?
4. How long do you have to wait for a non-urgent appointment?
5. What issues are you facing accessing healthcare?
6. Have things improved/worsened/stayed the same in terms of accessing healthcare through your GP since you have been registered with them?
7. What works well at your practice/surgery?
8. What could be improved at your practice/surgery?
9. If it's okay, can we take down your name and email address to follow up later on and keep you in the loop about this project?