

Gathering views
Booking GP appointments online



Healthwatch Islington

Healthwatch Islington is an independent organisation led by volunteers from the local community. It is part of a national network of Healthwatch organisations that involve people of all ages and from all sections of the community.

Healthwatch Islington gathers local people's views on the health and social care services that they use. We make sure those views are taken into account when decisions are taken on how services will look in the future, and how they can be improved.

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Background

‘There is a mismatch between how patients want to access GP services and how they actually do so. People want to be able to book appointments and order repeat prescriptions online, but aren’t doing so because they don’t know the services are there.’

Gillian Guy, Chief Executive, Citizens Advice

GP practices are contractually obliged to offer their patients the facility to book appointments online.¹ They are similarly required to offer patients other online services, namely the facility to order repeat prescriptions online, and to view the information held in their Summary Care Record. GP practices are also expected to promote all these services, so that their patients are aware that they are available.

In August 2015, Citizens Advice shared research showing that 1 in 20 patients were booking appointments online.² A survey of 858,381 people had revealed that only 27% were aware that online booking was available - and more than half (53%) of the respondents were unaware that any online GP services were available.

Introduction and methodology

In view of the number of comments Healthwatch Islington hears from residents about how hard it is to book an appointment with their GP, we decided to look into GP online appointment booking and whether this service could alleviate some of the pressure on GP practice reception staff and existing systems.

We have compiled a list of GP practices in the borough of Islington and of the 36 only two of them appear not to offer online booking³, however, they do offer online repeat prescription services. Several respondents' experiences were not in line with this finding, with respondents from the Miller Practice, the Northern Medical Centre and the Andover Medical Centre all reporting that their systems are not up and running.

To investigate whether this online appointment booking service is having any impact on accessing GP appointments we created an online survey, using SurveyMonkey (Appendix a) which was sent out by email to the Healthwatch membership, and promoted on our website and Facebook and Twitter pages.

We also had an information stand in Chapel Market towards the end of August and during the day asked those we were talking to whether they were aware of the online appointment booking service. Five people gave us their views.

The survey was open for 47 days from the 19th of July to the 15th of September. In that time we had 53 responses, 43 of which fitted the eligibility criteria (Q2. Is your GP practice in Islington?). The results represented 21 of the 36 GP practices in the borough (Appendix b).

The survey combined qualitative and quantitative questions in order to gather both numerical data and anecdotal feedback.

Figure 1: How easy was it to locate your GP practice website?

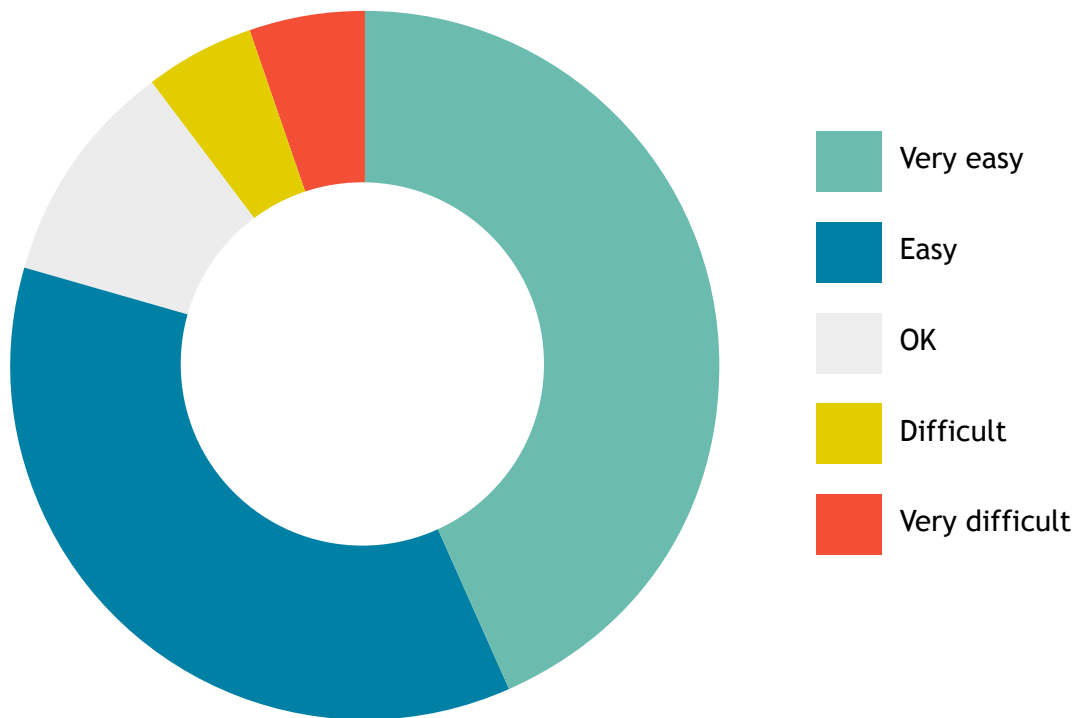
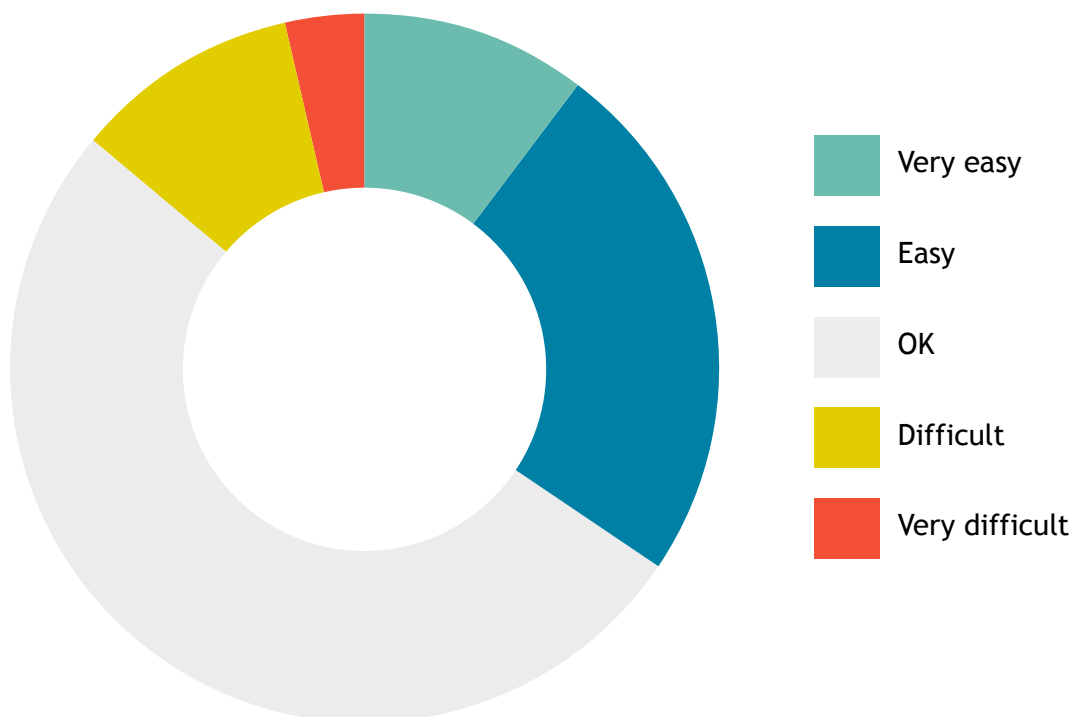


Figure 2: How easy did you find the online registration process?



Feedback from service users

GP Websites

- ▶ 17 of 39 respondents said that locating their GP website was very easy, with only four finding it difficult or very difficult.
- ▶ When asked about the accessibility of the website (readable font/ logical navigation) 14 out of 41 respondents found their GP website very easily accessible, whilst five found it difficult or very difficult to access.

‘Site was not easy to navigate or appealing’
Respondent 45

‘Everything was logically located’
Respondent 41

‘It has not got a very clear layout... The interface looks messy... The most important key messages should be at the top of the page.’
Respondent 38

There is a large variation in how accessible GP websites are.

One respondent commented that on their GP website ‘the telephone number is obscured by the banner heading (in Firefox).’ Healthwatch Islington followed this up with the practice.

Registration Process

- ▶ 15 of 29 respondents found the online registration process ‘ok’, with 10 finding the process easy or very easy and four finding it difficult or very difficult.
- ▶ 14 of 19 respondents had to go into their GP surgeries to get their registration details. Two respondents accessed this information via a letter sent from their GP, while another two received this information via email. (Only 19 eligible respondents answered this question as some did not have their registration details at the time of completing the survey.)

Difficulties logging in

Even when they had registered, some participants found themselves unable to log in and use the online service:

‘Although I have occasionally booked an appointment on line I cannot today... as my details aren’t recognised by surgery.’
Respondent 40

Help and Support

- ▶ 11 of 31 respondents felt that their GP surgery staff understood the online booking system and could offer the support required. Staff were helpful in providing and clarifying registration details and in talking patients through the system.
- ▶ 13 respondents said that they hadn’t needed to ask for support.

One respondent commented that when they contacted Killick Street Medical Centre they were put through to a member of staff who was designated to deal with online booking and other online service queries.

Online booking accessibility

Some respondents were frustrated with the accessibility of the online appointment booking service. Three of 13 respondents mentioned that once they had registered and accessed the on-line service they found that they had no choice of appointment, either only being offered one time or one doctor, if at all, and this meant that respondents were likely to call the surgery to make an appointment anyway.

‘It was fine, but sometimes I have a choice of appointments, eg three on the same day but at different times with male or female doctors. On other days I’m only offered one option. There is also no way to book same day appointments, which is what I usually need, so I’d probably still end up calling the surgery.’

Respondent 41

‘I have recently had a great deal of difficulty getting an appointment - it has happened that all appointments are taken and the booking details for the next time period are not yet available.’

Respondent 36

Two of 13 respondents found that they were not able to book an online appointment at all once they had registered. There was also frustration from other respondents that the system was too complex, even for the computer literate.

‘It was impossible to book an appointment!’

Respondent 53

Two of 13 respondents highlighted that the on-line booking service, and the registration process were not accessible to those who are blind or partially sighted, or those who have difficulty with their mobility.

‘My talking software makes the internet so complicated that I don’t use it. I’m afraid that my GP might be moving away from booking appointments and doing repeat prescriptions via the phone, which would make things very difficult for me.’

Respondent 52

Another respondent raised concern surrounding how those who struggle to leave the house would access this service.

Recommending this service?

20 out of 25 of respondents said that they would recommend this service to a friend or family member. A number of people expanded on this with a comment:

‘[Yes] but not in emergency. Appointments are usually delayed by weeks.’

Respondent 14

‘It’s useful for those who work full time. They don’t have to sit on the phone for half an hour to get an appointment’

Respondent 41

‘I haven’t really used it yet but it looks as though it will be really good.’

Respondent 36

‘It is easier than phoning the surgery because you can see what is available at a glance.’

Respondent 2

Some said they wouldn’t recommend the service:

‘Not at the moment. They would probably find it quite complicated, people are not going to use a service when it would have been quicker and easier to have picked up the phone and called the GP for their query.’

Respondent 38

‘Many of my friends do not have the means to book online or the skills to do so. Because of confidentiality and data protection it is difficult for other people to help them.’

Respondent 43

There was a fear that only the most able in the community would be able to use this service, with the less able and well-off being left to struggle on the phone.

Use of other online services

Only five respondents commented that they had used another online service, four of whom used the repeat prescription service.

‘When I have sorted out my access the above [updating patient record and repeat prescriptions] will be very useful.’
Respondent 40

‘I did not know I could notify GP of changes or look at my records.’
Respondent 43

One participant (respondent 21) commented that they hadn’t been able to access a summary of their medical records, despite it being an online service option.

How did you hear about the service?

- ▶ Out of the 34 responses to Question 8 ‘How did you find out that your GP practice had an online appointment booking system?’ at least 9 found out about it through Healthwatch.

‘I came across this survey when on the Healthwatch website I did not even know [online appointment booking] was an option.’
Respondent 38

‘Letters should have been sent out letting everyone know about this booking system, it would make my life a lot easier.’
Respondent 38 again

- ▶ Only three respondents heard about the service via a letter from their GP.
- ▶ Four respondents were made aware of the service via posters in their GP practice.

‘My grandson saw a poster while taking me for an appointment.’
Respondent 26

- ▶ Two respondents came across the service on their GP practice website.
- ▶ Five more were alerted by their GP/ practice manager/ patient participation group.

A number of people stated that they had not been made aware that the service existed:

‘I didn’t realise my practice had online booking. There has been no communication about it and I didn’t see any posters etc last time I visited the practice (in May).’
Respondent 47

‘It wasn’t offered to me... had to go and ask for it at my GP reception once I knew the service existed.’
Respondent 41

During an outreach event in Chapel Market on the 28th of August, we spoke to local service users about health and social care services. When circumstances allowed, we asked those who commented on GP surgeries whether they were aware of GP online appointment booking. Of the five people who responded, four did not know about the service. Only one of those four thought that the service would be useful or beneficial to them.

Conclusions

There appears to be a large variation in the way that GP practices run and manage their websites and the online booking system. Although respondents generally found it easy to locate and access their GP Practice website, it was more of a struggle to register for their online booking account.

We also received a number of comments suggesting that there is not enough choice of times or GP's online and this may cause service users to call practices anyway.

It should be made clear that this service really only operates for routine appointments and not emergency appointments.

On the whole respondents agreed that they would recommend the service to family or friends and could see the potential benefits.

This survey has raised awareness of the GP online appointment booking service throughout our membership, with those who we connected with in Chapel Market, and via our Facebook and Twitter presence.

From the responses we received we can conclude that a low number of service users are aware that they can book GP appointments online. We received a lot of feedback which suggested that people felt that GP service hadn't promoted the service well, and more could be done to make the service more accessible.

Not many respondents had used one of the other services available through their online account such as accessing their patient records, updating their details or requesting a repeat prescription. There may be space to promote these services further.

It seems as if there is a real place for this service. However, the purpose and function of this service could do with some clarification and promotion.

Recommendations

Recommendations for GP online services

Online booking systems should offer a wider range of appointment times and GPs. Where this is not possible, and no suitable appointments are available, this needs to be explained. Online service users should then be clearly signposted to an alternative option for booking an appointment.

More work needs to be done to let registered patients know that appointments can be booked via the GP practice website, and that other online services are also available.

- ▶ Posters promoting online services should be displayed in GP practice waiting rooms.
- ▶ Information on online services should be included in any existing mailings to patients.
- ▶ Information should be included in practice leaflets.
- ▶ Online services should be promoted by email. This is a good way of reaching those patients that are already using IT. As a means of promotion it is both cost effective and appropriate.

References

¹ The March 2015 to March 2016 GP contract contains revised IT requirements for GP practices. The British Medical Association summarises these in its March 2015 document 'Focus on the new IT requirements of the GP contract in England'. GP practices were required to promote and offer the facility for patients to book, view, amend, cancel and print appointments online, unless the GP practice did not have a GP Systems of Choice (GPSoC) approved website. There is no requirement in the GP contract to make a specific number of appointments available for online booking, but practices should ensure an 'appropriate number' are available.

² <http://www.wired-gov.net/wg/news.nsf/articles/CAB+Just+1+in+20+patients+book+GP+appointments+online+18082015104000?open>

³ Hanley Primary Care Centre and St John's Way Medical Practice

We contacted both GP Practices. Hanley Primary Care Centre responded explaining that they had had some glitches getting the online appointment booking system up and running. Hanley Primary Care Centre are under Whittington Health. This means that they do not have full control over their online presence. The Centre Manager was quick to tell Healthwatch that this was an issue they were working to fix, and within the week the website link was up and running. St John's Way Practice have changed their practice website. They now have a direct link to online appointment booking on their appointments page.

We also noticed when looking at local GP Practice websites that the Mitchison Road Surgery offers not only online booking but also doctors' appointments via skype (Skype2GP). You can only book these appointments online and they offer 10 minute consultations on Mondays and Fridays.

Appendices

a) Online survey

http://www.healthwatchislington.co.uk/sites/default/files/appendix_a_booking_gp_appointments_online.pdf

b) List of GP Practices represented:

Andover Medical Centre
Bingfield Medical Centre (practice now closed)
Dr Ko and Partner
Hanley Primary Care Centre
Highbury Grange Medical Practice
Islington Central Medical Centre
Killick Street Health Centre
Mildmay Medical Practice
Partnership Primary Care Centre
New North Health Centre
Ritchie Street Group Practice
River Place Group Practice
Sobell Medical Centre
St. John's Way Medical Practice
St. Peters Street Medical Practice
The Goodinge Group Practice
The Miller Practice
The Northern Medical Centre
Pine Street Medical Practice
The Village Practice
Stroud Green Medical Clinic

