



Enter & View
Lapal Medical Practice
February 2024

healthwatch
Dudley

Background

Healthwatch Dudley listen to people's views and experiences of access to all types of health and care settings.

The national NHS England GP Patient Survey (2023) highlighted the difficulties some patients were encountering when trying to get an appointment at their surgery. Following local engagement with people living in the Dudley borough, we decided to conduct a wider piece of research.

All Healthwatch have powers of Enter & View, which allows conversations to take place with people in health and care settings.

Lapal Medical Practice was randomly selected to be part of an Enter & View visit.

This report provides a snapshot of the conversations around access to appointments at Lapal Medical Practice. The findings from this Enter & View report will inform a borough-wide GP Practice Access report.

The visit

Two members of Healthwatch Dudley staff visited the surgery between 9.30 am and 11.30 am on Friday 23 February 2024.

Lapal Medical Practice has two waiting rooms where patients wait to see any of the health professionals.

Patients were invited to speak to a member of Healthwatch Dudley staff to share their experience of booking their appointments. As part of our conversations, we asked which method was used to make the appointment and enquired about the level of knowledge of the other health professionals they could be seen by at the surgery.

Patients were also asked if there was anything else they would like to add about the surgery whilst speaking to us.

In total, we spoke to 18 people during our visit.

Conversations

We spoke to a range of patients who had made an appointment by telephone or a health professional had booked it for them as a routine or follow-up appointment.

We observed several patients who came into the surgery to book an appointment with the receptionist. Other patients told us that they often came into the surgery to book their appointments.

Getting through on the telephone

Patients appeared to have varied experiences when making appointments by telephone. It is important to note that some patients referred to previous experiences which may have been before the introduction of the new telephone system.

Some patients commented that getting through by telephone was more difficult in the past but that the surgery now had a new telephone system which was better. Patients also appreciated knowing where they were in the queue when ringing for an appointment.

Patients commented that there may be longer waits to get through on the telephone at peak times.

A few patients said they preferred not to ring the surgery because often the lines were busy.

Patients valued being able to ring up to make an appointment or to be able to walk into the surgery and speak to the receptionist.

Getting through on the telephone

“I called up this morning and I was first in the queue, it can be quite a lengthy wait to get through.”

“I make appointments by phone. You have to ring at 8.00 am. Sometimes you have to keep trying. You can book in advance if you want to see a specific doctor. If it is an emergency you can usually get an appointment that day, if not they allocate you another day.”

I don't use the phone, as it's usually busy.

It's been difficult to get through at times, I have tried up to 200 times before, but now there is a queueing system so I can wait on hold rather than keep re-dialing.

I know there was a new phone system installed last week.

I feel I need to speak to someone to make an appointment due to my husband having existing health conditions, so I can explain what is wrong.

It is quite easy to get through by phone, but if you ring up at 8.00 am you have got no chance. If there aren't any appointments available, they tell you to ring back at noon to see if there are any in the afternoon.



Online services

None of the patients we spoke to had booked their appointment online.

Some patients said they thought they could book appointments online but were not very confident with the technology. They added that they would try to use online services if they had help.

Other patients commented that they preferred to speak to someone when they needed an urgent appointment rather than use an online service.

One patient thought that the online service had stopped.

Other patients knew they could make an appointment to see the nurse by booking online.

A few patients reported difficulty accessing online services and that they were being directed to Patient Access.*

“I know I can make an appointment online but I don’t want to and anyway, I find it difficult to log in. I asked the helpline in the past, but what they suggested to me didn’t work, so I would need to ask them again if I want to try and use online services. I would book online if it wasn’t urgent, but I prefer to speak to someone.”

“I know you can book online but I am not very good. If I had help, I would have a go but I am not very confident.”



Online services

*"You can't book online or request services. The web page just tells you to log in to Patient Access."**

"I find the website very confusing. I know there is a 'Contact Us' form, but it is not very user-friendly. I tried using the online form but never received a response to my request. So now I call because I need to know my request has been dealt with."

"The online form doesn't seem to be working lately so I decided to ring up to make an appointment. I haven't told the surgery about the problem with the online form as yet."

"If you go online, it says you can book to see a nurse but not a doctor."

***Patient Access** connects you to local health services when you need them.

You can book GP appointments, order repeat prescriptions and discover local health services for you or your family via your mobile or home computer.



Wider healthcare teams

The majority of patients we spoke to were waiting to see a GP or a nurse.

Several patients said they were aware of the other health professionals they could see because the receptionist had told them or they had seen them in the past.

Overall, though many patients said they were aware of some of the other health professionals they could see, there was an indication that more information would be helpful.

I know about the nurse, nurse practitioner and paramedic as they have been offered to me by the receptionist. I would like to know more information, perhaps by text?

I am aware of the physio here. I know there is a [mental health] nurse here too. I suppose more information could be put on the website but not sure how many people use it.

I know about the doctor, nurse and midwife. I would like more information, maybe put it on the notice board?

I don't know about any of the other health professionals I can see and would like more information.

I see a Listening & Guidance person, they are very helpful. They are trying to connect me with services to help me.

I am aware there is a nurse who can do blood tests, give you vaccinations and smear tests. I also see one particular doctor as I have an implant and I know I have a family doctor.



Additional comments

Some patients made additional comments during our conversations.

I have to wait 4-6 weeks to see my preferred GP.

If you're really bad they'll see you.

I haven't got any concerns about the surgery.

I walked into the surgery once to ask for an emergency appointment and was told to go to A&E as there weren't any available or to ring back the next day at 8.00 am. It was very stressful.

Messages on the website can be out of date.

I am happy with the practice, never had a problem here.
The receptionists are helpful.

The receptionists are wonderful and very approachable.

This is [one of the] the best doctors in the area.

My daughter is disabled, they do yearly health checks, that's good. It is nice that someone checks her. They also ask for feedback after each appointment.



Our observations

There were mixed comments about getting through on the telephone to make appointments.

We understand that the practice had a new telephone system a week or so prior to our visit, therefore, some patients may have been referring to their previous experience of contacting the practice. However, it would appear that some patients have started to notice a improvement in the telephone system.

Patients seemed to be unclear on the ways they may be able to seek help or book appointments online. Other patients had successfully used online services in the past, but said they were having difficulties recently.

Whilst there was a variety of information displayed on notice boards, this did not appear to be themed to enable patients to quickly identify items of relevance.



Considerations



Telephone system

Patients may benefit from information about the new telephone system that has been installed and what to expect when they call to book appointments.



Support with online services

It would be useful for the practice to share clear information with patients about how to seek help online which may alleviate pressures on the telephone lines at peak times. Patients could be given details about how to use the surgery website or be directed to the NHS app/Patient Access* if appropriate.



Notice boards

Patients may be able to access information more easily if the notice boards in the waiting rooms are themed and regularly updated.



Response from Lapal Medical Practice

"We are grateful for opportunities afforded by gaining valuable insight in to patient experiences in the practice."

-Practice Manager

Response to considerations



Getting through on the telephone

Lapal Medical Practice feel the introduction of the new phone system will provide a more uniform approach to access.

The new phone system will:

- Provide information on where people are in the queue so they can decide whether to wait.
- Provide a new ring back option, meaning people will not have to make repeated attempts to phone the surgery.
- Provide information on peak times, in order to potentially tailor staff to meet demand.

"We are pleased to see that patients value being able to still make appointments at the front desk and speak to reception staff.

We pride ourselves on our friendly, warm and attentive reception team and feel this kind of access is vitally important, not least in circumstances where patients may have difficulty using the phone or when trying to combat digital exclusion."

Response to considerations



Online services

Lapal Medical Practice does provide online access appointments.

- Nurse appointments are labelled specifically, e.g. smears, asthma reviews, health checks etc. in order to assure the right amount of time is allocated
- There are a limited number of GP appointments available online. Due to the nature of GP appointments it is difficult for patients to determine the type of appointment and the clinician they need to see
- If people prefer to use online services to book appointments, they can contact the team through the website who can establish the patients individual needs and signpost accordingly
- There are future plans to use a triage system.

“Lapal Medical Practice strongly believe in the patient having their individual needs met and their voice heard at first point of contact.”



Extended healthcare team

Lapal Medical Practice are pleased the reception team inform patients of the wider healthcare team and that some patients are taking advantage of the services provided.

Lapal Medical Practice hope to promote the extended healthcare team on their website, social media and notice boards.



Response to considerations



Notice boards

Lapal Medical Practice were in the process of updating notice boards during the visit and aim to group posters to make information more accessible.

Final words

Lapal Medical Practice are pleased that patients find the reception team to be helpful, approachable and friendly.

As in every surgery there are occasions when there will be waits to see specific clinicians or when patients need to be signposted to other care providers. However, Lapal Medical Practice now aim to deal with patients at first point of contact, instead of requesting they call back.

“We consider all feedback as positive as it all provides opportunity for growth and improvement.”



Thank you

We were pleased to listen to patients at Lapal Medical Practice, the majority of whom were more than willing to share their views.

We heard a range of responses and hope that the experiences of patients and the points we have raised for consideration can be used to improve services.

Healthwatch Dudley will be collating the feedback received from all GP Enter & View visits, survey responses and discussions with patient groups, to explore GP surgery access across the Dudley borough.

References

NHS England (2023) GP Patient Survey
Available at <https://www.gp-patient.co.uk/surveysandreports> [Accessed February 16 2024]



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