

# **Exploring Patient Understanding and Experiences of their Doctors' Surgeries**

**October 2022**

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# Who we are and what we do

Healthwatch Norfolk is the independent voice for patients and service users in the county. We gather people's views of health and social care services in the county and make sure they are heard by the people in charge.

The people who fund and provide services have to listen to you, through us. So, whether you share a good or bad experience with us, your views can help make changes to how services are designed and delivered in Norfolk.

Our work covers all areas of health and social care. This includes GP surgeries, hospitals, dentists, care homes, pharmacies, opticians and more.

We also give out information about the health and care services available in Norfolk and direct people to someone who can help.

At Healthwatch Norfolk we have five main objectives:

1. Gather your views and experiences (good and bad)
2. Pay particular attention to underrepresented groups
3. Show how we contribute to making services better
4. Contribute to better signposting of services
5. Work with national organisations to help create better services

We make sure we have lots of ways to collect feedback from people who use Norfolk's health and social care services. This means that everyone has the same chance to be heard.

# Summary

- Healthwatch Norfolk noticed a rise in the number of patients dissatisfied with their experiences at doctors' surgeries. Patients were telling us they were unhappy with waiting times, unsure of the triaging processes, and general negativity with access and the services offered to them.
- We decided to carry out targeted engagement at doctors' surgeries throughout Summer 2022 (May to August) to find out more.
- Our main aim was to be able to help surgeries across Norfolk ensure their patients are well informed about the way they work, the services they offer, the people they may be offered an appointment with, and the options available to them.
- We visited 50 different sites for this work. We received feedback from 516 patients.
- Nearly half (46%) of respondents rated their experience of booking appointments as five out of five. Across doctors' surgeries, there was a wide range of average rating for booking appointments. For surgeries where we received more than five surveys, this varied from an average of 1.8 to an average of 5.0 out of five.
- Over half (54%) of respondents rated their overall experience with their doctors' surgery as five out of five. Again, there was a wide range of average ratings across surgeries. For surgeries where we received more than five surveys, this varied from an average of 2.9 to an average of 5.0 out of five.
- The table below shows a summary of what makes a positive experience or what causes frustrations at doctors' surgeries based on what patients told us.

Positive experiences	Negative experiences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easy to get through on the telephone.</li> <li>• Can book appointments using the preferred method.</li> <li>• Easy to get an appointment in the format wanted and with the clinician wanted.</li> <li>• Feeling looked after by the surgery and treated well by all staff.</li> <li>• Acceptance and understanding of new ways of working.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long waits on the telephone</li> <li>• Restrictions to how appointments could be booked.</li> <li>• Hard to get an appointment in the format wanted and with the clinician wanted.</li> <li>• Feeling overlooked by the surgery.</li> <li>• Reluctance to adapt to new ways of working and wanting things to be how it used to be.</li> </ul>

- Based on our findings we recommended (see page 30):
  1. Individual surgeries review phone systems and shorten waiting times on phones to reduce patient frustration.
  2. NHS Norfolk and Waveney ICB create more opportunities for surgeries to share best practice and learning with each other for example at Primary Care Network (PCN) meetings.
  3. Surgeries and their Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) take greater responsibility for communicating with their patients and actively communicate through appropriate methods, for example regular email newsletters and text updates.
  4. Continuing and consistent information sharing and engagement with patients, both at an NHS Norfolk and Waveney ICB level, an individual surgery level, and with support from Healthwatch Norfolk.
  5. Recognising the pressure on the wider system, Healthwatch Norfolk to explore patient experiences at other front door health services, such as pharmacies, to ensure that there is sufficient and satisfactory support available.

# Why we looked at this

## Background

During general patient engagement at doctors' surgeries Healthwatch Norfolk noticed a rise in the number of patients telling us they were unhappy with waiting times on the phone to get an appointment, unsure of the triaging processes, and general negativity with access and the services offered to them.

Healthwatch Norfolk understands that doctors' Surgeries are under immense pressure at the moment and wanted to talk to patients across Norfolk to find out about their understanding of the services and options available to them.

By visiting surgeries and engaging with patients, we wanted to find out if patients are aware of the health service options available to them to see where misinformation or misunderstanding occurs – allowing us to develop educational content to share both with surgeries and through our own channels.

We are aware all surgeries run slightly differently and offer different services and take this into account.

## What were we being told?

There was an overall feeling from previous engagement that patients think receptionists make clinical decisions. When speaking with Practice Managers we found that receptionists or care navigators are trained to signpost patients to the correct person to help with their problem but are not making clinical decisions.

We wanted to find out if patients automatically go straight to their surgery when they have a health concern or whether they try other avenues first such as visiting a pharmacist or using NHS 111 online.

Previous feedback showed that patients want to only see their GP, when there are often other people at the surgery who would be appropriate to see them, such as Practice Nurses, Nurse Practitioners, Paramedics, Clinical Pharmacists, Physician's Associates and First Contact Practitioner's (physiotherapists).

## **Aims and objectives**

Our main aim was to help surgeries across Norfolk ensure their patients are well informed. This includes communication about the way they work, the services they offer, the people they may be offered an appointment with, and the options available to them. If a patient is well communicated with, and well informed, it is likely that they will have a better experience.

# How we did this

Healthwatch Norfolk Community Development Officers decided on the questions to be asked based on feedback already gathered in the months previous to May 2022. It was noted that the main frustration was based around experiences of booking an appointment and not being able to see a GP.

We asked one of our previously visited surgeries, Hingham, and our Trustee Andrew Hayward who is a retired GP and sits on the Primary Care Commissioning Committee to take a look at the proposed question prompts and let us know if the survey was rounded and fair.

Over three months, from the end of May 2022 to the end of August 2022 Healthwatch Norfolk contacted 78 doctors' surgeries across Norfolk to speak to them about the survey, showing them the questions we would be asking their patients and whether we could visit them.

## Feedback collection

A high proportion of the feedback collected is from patients who had an appointment at the surgery we were visiting. Some were there to visit the dispensary/on site chemist. Some people were there with a family member or friend and some were just passing.

Our presence at the surgeries was advertised on social media and through the Healthwatch Norfolk website.

## Who took part?

Out of 91 practices across Norfolk, and 109 surgery sites, we contacted 78 Practices to take part in this engagement process and we visited 50 sites over 14 weeks. We gathered feedback from 516 people.

Ten sites had been visited recently so were not actively contacted again to take part. Eleven practices did not respond to our requests to come and visit and speak with their patients. Due to time constraints a further 10 Practices were booked in after the project finished, reports from these visits will be shared on



our website here: [www.healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/reports/feedback-and-intelligence/](http://www.healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/reports/feedback-and-intelligence/).

We were really pleased with the response from surgeries we approached and that they welcomed us in to speak with their patients for this piece of work. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those who took part and hope that we have built positive links and partnerships for moving forward.

## How could people leave feedback?

We visited surgeries across North, South, East and West Norfolk as well as Norwich. The Engagement team of Community Development Officers, supported by other Healthwatch Team members, volunteers and trustees, visited and spoke to patients on a one to one basis.

There was no pressure to stop and talk, but we found people were keen to speak to us and let us know their thoughts which we wrote down at the time of speaking. Paper copies of the survey were given to people who requested to have one if they didn't have time to stop. These were given with a freepost envelope to come back to us in the post.

All surveys received were then entered by us into a survey hosted on SmartSurvey for easy collation and individual reviews of services were shared on our website. Where we received more than ten responses for one surgery we also produced a feedback report for the surgery which can be found here:

[www.healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/reports/feedback-and-intelligence/](http://www.healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/reports/feedback-and-intelligence/)

## Ethical considerations

Every person we spoke to was asked to consent for their feedback to be shared, both in this report, on the website and with the surgery. The option to be anonymous or leave a name was given.

## About this report

Anonymised survey data has been analysed using NVivo and Microsoft Excel and we have produced this report to share with all surgeries and patients. This data will help us look at what surgeries can do to improve communication with patients and patients' experiences of booking appointments' in the future.

Please also note that the number of responses per question varied as questions were not compulsory. In addition to this, for some patients questions were not relevant to them or they were unsure how to answer the question.

## Limitations

We acknowledge that for this piece of work we spoke to patients at doctors' surgeries and that these patients were likely to have had an in person appointment and consequently may have reported a different experience than other patients. However, we also spoke to family members and carers of patients and also some who were visiting the dispensary so did not exclusively speak with patients who had appointments. Alongside this we should highlight that in general we do also carry out engagement at non-clinical settings such as libraries and patients can also leave feedback with us on our website and over the telephone.

# What we found out

The survey received responses from 516 patients which make up the following analysis.

## Before appointments

We asked patients whether they looked anywhere else for information before they contacted their doctors' surgery for help, Figure 1 shows responses to this question.

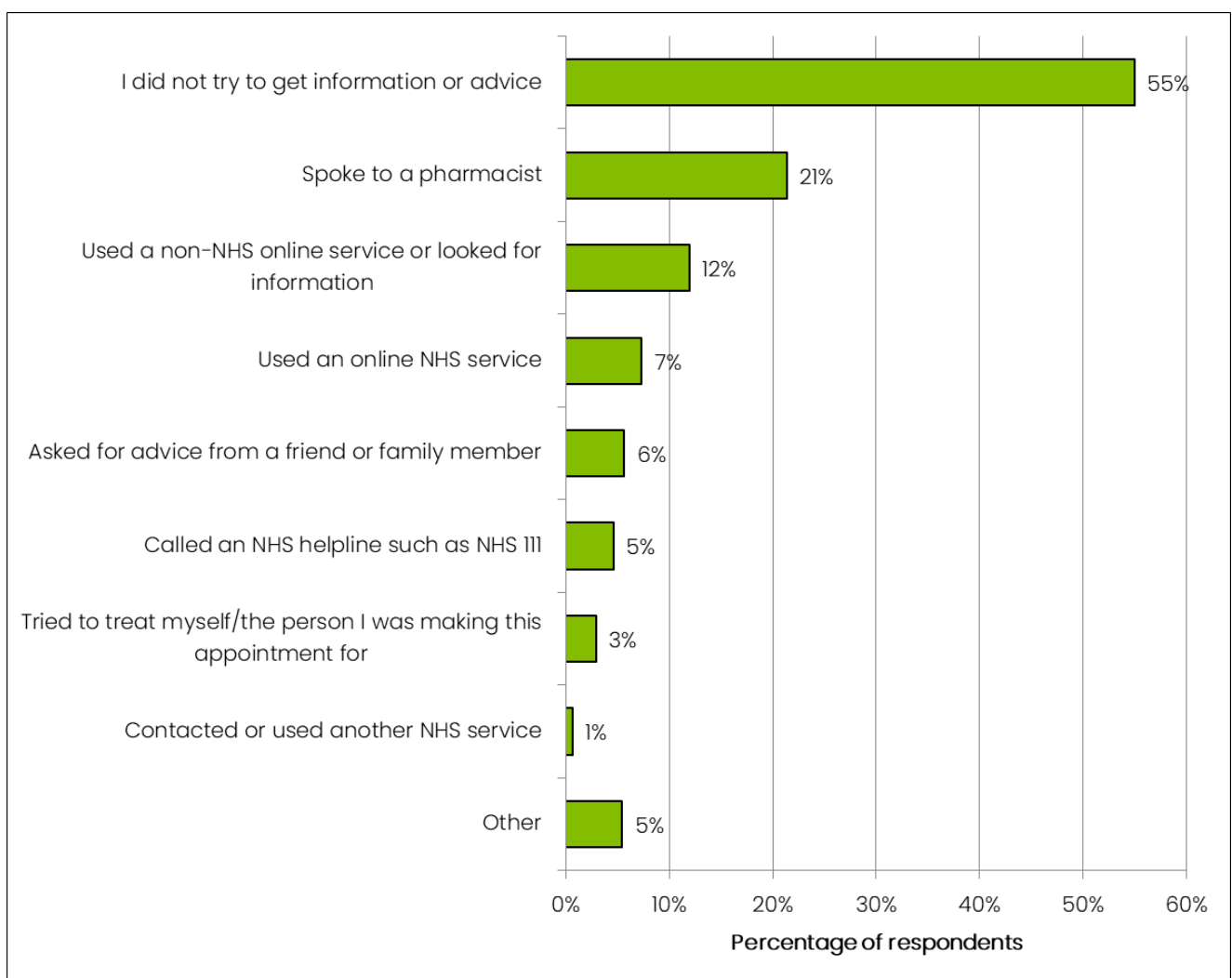


Figure 1. A chart showing responses from 478 patients to the question 'did you look for information anywhere else before contacting your doctors' surgery?'. More than one response could be chosen.

As the graph shows, the majority of patients told us that they did not try to get information or advice before contacting their doctors' surgery (55%, 263). The reasons for this included knowing or thinking that the doctors' surgery was the best place for their issues: *"because I thought I needed to see a doctor"* or that they *"always come to the doctor first"*. This also included several patients who had ongoing issues or had been told to contact their surgery such as: *"follow up from hospital visit"*. Others told us that they *"only come if I was really sick"*.

For some patients, other services were seen as inappropriate or unhelpful. For example, one patient told us about using NHS 111 in the past that they *"find it very frustrating them having to speak to the person that is ill as if they are poorly they can't remember what is said to them"*. Another patient told us that they felt their *"local pharmacist is bad at the moment"*.

It is worth noting that some patients explained what they would typically do before contacting their doctors' surgery while others only focused on what they had done before their appointment that day. In future work it would be helpful to explore this further and find out what patients typically do when they feel unwell or need medical advice at other times.

## Booking appointments

The average rating out of five for booking appointments was 3.8. Figure 2 below displays the percentage of respondents for each rating, as the graph shows 46% (230) of the patients we spoke to rated booking appointments as five out of five.

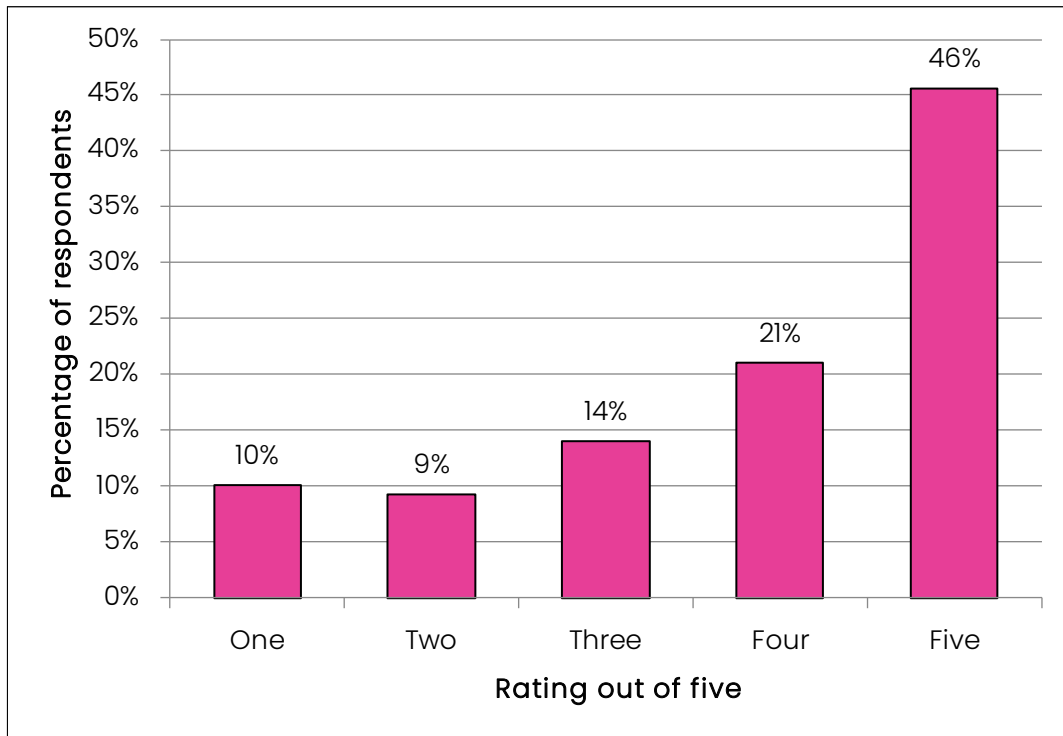


Figure 2. A chart displaying rating out of five for booking appointments from 505 patients.

There was a wide range of average rating for booking appointments across doctors' surgeries which we visited. For surgeries where we received more than five surveys, this varied from an average of 1.8 to an average of 5.0 out of five.

The following section presents the analysis of these three questions:

- Comments from 'how would you rate your experience of booking appointments at your doctors surgery?'
- What do you think happens to your request when you contact the doctors surgery for an appointment? (for example who do you think makes clinical decisions? How is the urgency of request decided?)
- What one thing would improve your experience of booking appointments at your doctors surgery?

## Can I get an appointment?

Unsurprisingly, overall experience of booking appointments was closely linked to whether the patient felt they were able to get an appointment when they needed one.

As in the case study for Surgery A below, patients at this surgery were easily able to get appointments and this was reflected in their star ratings.

Surgery A, average rating of booking appointments 4.9 out of five.

At one of the surgeries we visited the patients reported being very pleased with their access to appointments. Patients at this surgery told us that they felt like they had multiple options for accessing and attending appointments, *"I phone to make appointments and never have to wait to get through. I also use the open surgery, so I just show up and wait to be seen."* Those patients that chose to phone the surgery to make appointments reported no issues, *"I phone and it's easy"* and *"I phone and it always works well."* When we asked these patients who they thought made decisions about what kind of appointment they should have, some of them told us that they, the patient, got to decide on their appointment type, *"The receptionist asks me what kind of appt I need, I get to choose."* Another patient told us, *"I decide."*

Similarly to those in the above case study, patients who were able to book appointments easily with their surgery often simply reported that it was *"no problem"*, that it is *"quick and easy"*. Others appeared accepting that they *"don't always need to see my GP and the Nurse Practitioners are always able to help"*. Alongside this, other patients highlighted how their surgery was accommodating and that they *"are not restricted where we choose and we can see a choice of clinicians at the different places"*.

On the other hand, some patients expressed frustration at feeling like they were unable to get appointments at their doctors' surgery. This included simply feeling like there are *"never any appointments"*. However as presented below, this also included whether they could book advance appointments, having a lack of in person appointments, wanting services to return to how they used to be, and feeling like care was delayed.

### *Can I book in advance?*

We heard from some patients that they were only able to book appointments on the day, and wanted to *"book ahead of time, I'd want to book a week ahead not just on the day"*. With one patient telling us that they *"came in on Wednesday"*

*and was told no - emergencies only. I spent 10 minutes explaining my problem and was told to call back Thursday. I am happy to book ahead but I can't"*

### *Lack of in person appointments*

Patients who felt frustrated told us that they found it difficult to get in person face to face appointments at their doctors' surgery. They felt that appointments which were virtual were not as good, for example one patient told us that they *"had a diagnosis over the phone, I was not seen and no tests were done."* This then led them to feel that *"I do not think the diagnosis is correct."* Similarly, the below extract demonstrates the anxiety that patients and their families or carers can feel when they are unable to have the appointment type they feel is needed.

*"My husband has complex medical needs. In the last year he has been declined appointments twice and I filled in an online form. I am concerned I wanted someone to see him as I wasn't sure if he had had a stroke. I am a nurse - the dr rang back said it was vertigo and prescribed something over the phone. I asked to be seen and the dr said there was no need."*

### *I want it how it used to be*

This was most frequently mentioned in suggestions for improvements to experiences of booking appointments. Some patients felt like the service had declined as a consequence of the COVID pandemic and that it was now more difficult to access their doctors' surgery.

This included patients who felt like there were fewer appointments (*"it's got worse now than during covid. It is impossible to see people here"*) but also included patients who did not like the systems in place for booking appointments. For example, the following suggestion for improvement: *"being given an appointment when you phone to ask for one, not to have to wait for a call back and then have one made"*

### *Feeling like delayed care*

Similarly, to the above response, other patients indicated that call back systems in place made them feel like they were getting delayed care.

“Because half the time you have to wait for them to answer the phone. Then you have to wait for a Dr to call then you don’t always get an appointment. I have cancer and I need things.”

### *I have to fight for an appointment*

Finally, a few patients told us they felt like they had to “*really push to get an appointment*”. This concerned patients as they told us that “*‘he who shouts louder’ might get in*” and that “*someone vulnerable and not assertive called they could get left as they don’t like to bother, whereas I am happy to say ‘no give me a face to face I need one’, some people won’t do that and that isn’t fair*”.

### **Can I get through on the phone?**

Most people we spoke to told us that they contacted their surgery on the phone. This was the cause of a lot of frustration for those who rated their experience of booking an appointment poorly. For example, in the below case study for Surgery B you can see the impact that the phone system had on overall experience of booking appointments.

Surgery B, average rating of booking appointments 1.8 out of five.

Whilst speaking to patients, we heard about a variety of experiences about accessing appointments. The patients who were unhappy with their perceived access to medical appointments struggled with issues such as long waits on the phone, “*Once I started at number 30 in the queue and then when I got to number 1 I was cut off!*” Another patient at the same surgery said, “*I’ve waited up to 2 hours on the phone.*” Once people did get through, they reported frustration at the result of the call, “*You end up on the phone for 30 minutes and then there are no appointments.*” One patient at that surgery said, “*Unless you get through dead on 8am you do not get an appointment.*” The patients we spoke to at this surgery really struggled to get through and access the care they felt they needed.

As illustrated in the above example, frustrations included having “*to wait a long time on the phone to get through*”, having to call at a specific time of day for the



best chance of getting appointments: *"I don't understand the call at 8 in the morning thing. I would prefer to be able to call anytime of day",* and getting cut off on the phone with some patients therefore having to call multiple times: *"it took my wife 20 attempts before she got through".*

Those who were happy with the phone system told us they like that they *"hear the response straight away",* that it simply *"works well".*



*"They're so lovely - I rang up at 8.30, waited 2-3 minutes and spoke - got a phone appointment at 10am and GP phoned within the time window given."*



## **Can I use the online system?**

The patients we spoke to for this project did not often tell us that they used the online system to book appointments. Some patients told us that they were unable to use the online system because they found it confusing or considered themselves to be *"computer illiterate"* or *"non digital"*.

However, for those who were able to use the online system at their surgery they frequently reported being happy with the system and how it worked. We heard that they *"get an answer quite quick"* with one patient telling us how they *"sent in a form last night and was in this morning for an appointment"*. Others noted how they were able to *"think clearly about what I want to say, write it all down and the Dr can see it"* this patient also added that *"when you go in and see a Dr you can forget what you want to say but on a form you can put everything there"*.

We also were told at some surgeries that the *"online system was working but now it's not working"* and that they wanted to have the option to book appointments online again: *"I'd like them to bring the online form back, it was very handy"*.

## Are staff helpful

How staff communicated with patients on the phone when they requested appointments had an impact on how they felt booking appointments went.



“Reception will say if the doctor is there and when is best to call back if needed. They give information and they’ll say when they have an appointment. They’re all SO helpful and amazing.”



The helpfulness of staff appeared to have greater influence on overall experiences at doctors’ surgeries, therefore will be discussed in more detail later in this report.

## What happens to my request

Receptionists making decisions was overwhelmingly the most common response when we asked patients what they thought happens to their request when they contact the surgery and who makes clinical decisions or decisions of urgency.

### *Privacy concerns*

Some patients expressed concerns about the privacy of this and that they *“don’t want to tell reception what is wrong”* and they *“don’t feel comfortable telling the receptionists my medical complaints, I wish we didn’t have to go into detail with them to get an appointment”*.

### *Uncertainty about what happens*

When we asked this question to patients they also often told us that they had *“no idea”*, they were *“not sure”*, or *“don’t know”*.

Even among those who provided an answer there was often uncertainty in their answers for example: *“I hope that would be the doctor but I am not sure because I have heard other stories. Maybe receptionists”*. Others made assumptions such as *“I’m not sure but the receptionist asks questions and then I assume it’s a triage system”* and *“I think someone looks at it and decides, not sure who. Doctor or a nurse?”*.

## *Triage system*

As in the previous quote some patients we spoke to were aware of triaging systems in place at their doctors' surgeries and that clinical staff made decisions about their appointments.

They told us that they understood the *"receptionist takes details and passes them on to nurse practitioner, who calls back or passes details to dr. who calls back"*

It was also clear that patients had different levels of understanding, in comparison to the uncertainty from many people we spoke to, some patients gave detailed explanations for what happened to their requests and understood that staff would be trained in triaging for example the following patient:

*"Firstly it is seen by reception and then they speak to the relevant person that can help. Either the nurse or the GP. I think the medical staff make the clinical decisions regarding my care but that the admin staff have trained in screening/triaging"*

## *Impact on overall experience*

It is also worth noting that understanding what happened to their request this did not always impact on the overall rating of experience, some patients were happy with receptionists making these decisions: *"It's not usually urgent and I suppose the receptionist makes the decision. The system seems good"*, or with not knowing at all: *"I don't know, but whatever the decision it's very good"*.

## **What would improve booking appointments**

Some suggestions for improvements have already been reported on in the above sections, for example wanting phones answered more quickly and having access to online booking again. However alongside this we heard other suggestions as presented below. It is worth noting that when asked to suggest improvements 142 patients told us that they felt there was nothing to improve or that they *"can't think of anything"*

## Staff levels

One suggestion for improvement was that *"they need more staff"* and *"more people so they can respond quicker"*. In particular, specific to booking appointment experiences, patients felt that there needed to be *"more staff on the phones. I waited for 1 hour and I only wanted to change my physio appointment"*.

## Hold music and long phone message

A smaller improvement suggestion was to change the hold music when waiting for the phone to be answered. One patient told us that *"the hold music is much louder than the person who answers the phone which means you hold it away from your ear then don't always hear the person answer it"*. Another felt that this hold music may frustrate patients and impact their attitude when the call is answered: *"The hold music on the phone is so depressing and it drives you mad. I think half the time when people do get through they are in a bad mood because of listening to the music and take it out on the receptionists."*

Similarly, some other patients mentioned the long messages on the telephone led them to feel frustrated before even speaking with anyone, suggesting that *"the long recorded message when you call could be modified or skipped. It's too long"*. Others felt that the message *"probably isn't necessary anymore"*.

## Communication from your doctors' surgery

We asked patients how they would prefer to be contacted by the surgery for news or general updates. This was an open-ended question where patients were able to give multiple suggestions and responses were coded. The most common answer was email with 47% of patients (209) choosing this. This was followed by text with 36% of patients (160).

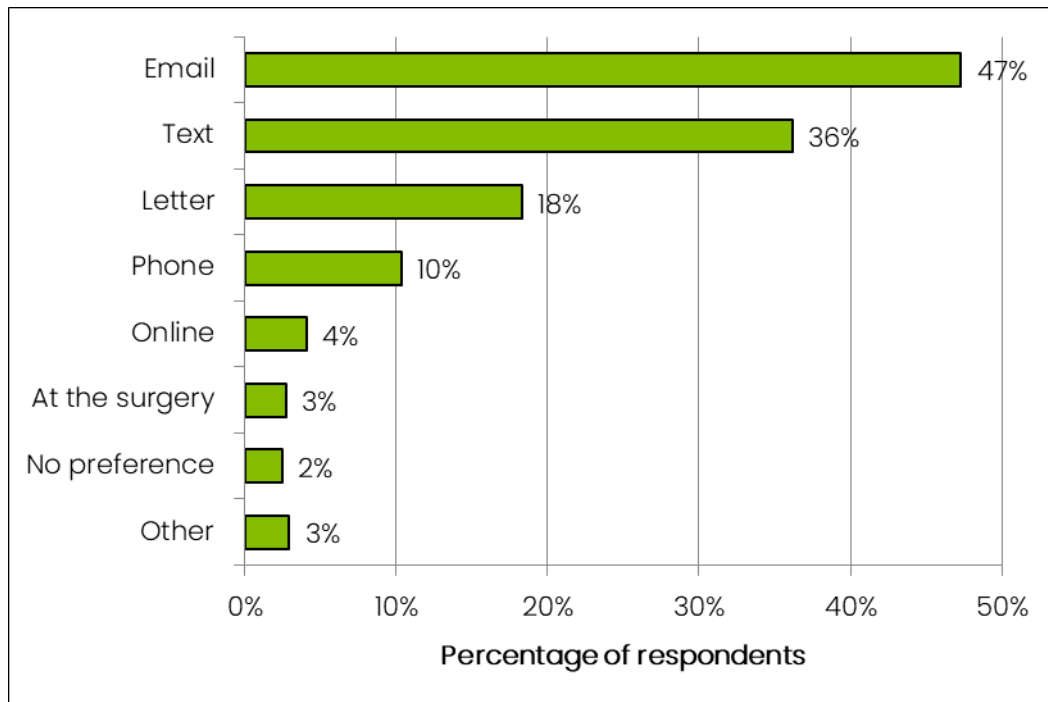


Figure 3. A chart showing responses from 442 patients to the question ‘How would you like to receive any updates from the surgery?’. Multiple responses could be given. ‘Other’ responses included leaflets, social media, and parish or village magazines.

## Services offered by my doctors’ surgery

We found that many people we spoke to appeared to be unsure about which services their surgery offered other than appointments with nurses and GPs. Some patients seemed to be making assumptions or guesses about services which their doctors’ surgery offered, for example one patient told us *“I assume there are midwifery services, physio and OT but no personal need to access them”*. Alongside this, others told us that they may not know what services were offered but they felt they could find out if they wanted to: *“I am not sure but if I needed more I would look on the website”*.

Alternatively, we also heard from some patients that they were simply aware that the surgery offered other services, but they did not or were not able to list them for example: *“I know there are others but I don’t know what they are”*.

The below word cloud displays some of the most common services and words in responses we received to this question. The larger the word the more frequently they were used.



Figure 4. A word cloud showing some of the most common responses to the question ‘what services are you aware of that your doctors’ surgery offer?’. Please note that some names of services have naturally been broken up in this cloud for example “*stop smoking*”, “*blood tests*” or “*mental health*”

As the word cloud displays the most common service patients told us they were aware of was physiotherapy, it is worth mentioning that this was often the example of a service we used when asking patients this question so there is likely some bias in responses.

Beyond this, the cloud shows that some patients were aware of services such as mental health nurses and wellbeing services, and clinics for hearing, stop smoking, asthma, and diabetes.

## Overall experience

The average rating out of five for overall experience at the surgeries was 4.3. Figure 5 displays the percentage of respondents for each rating. As the graph shows 54% (274) of respondents rated their surgery as five out of five whilst very few patients rated their surgery as one (3%, 15) or two (3%, 17).

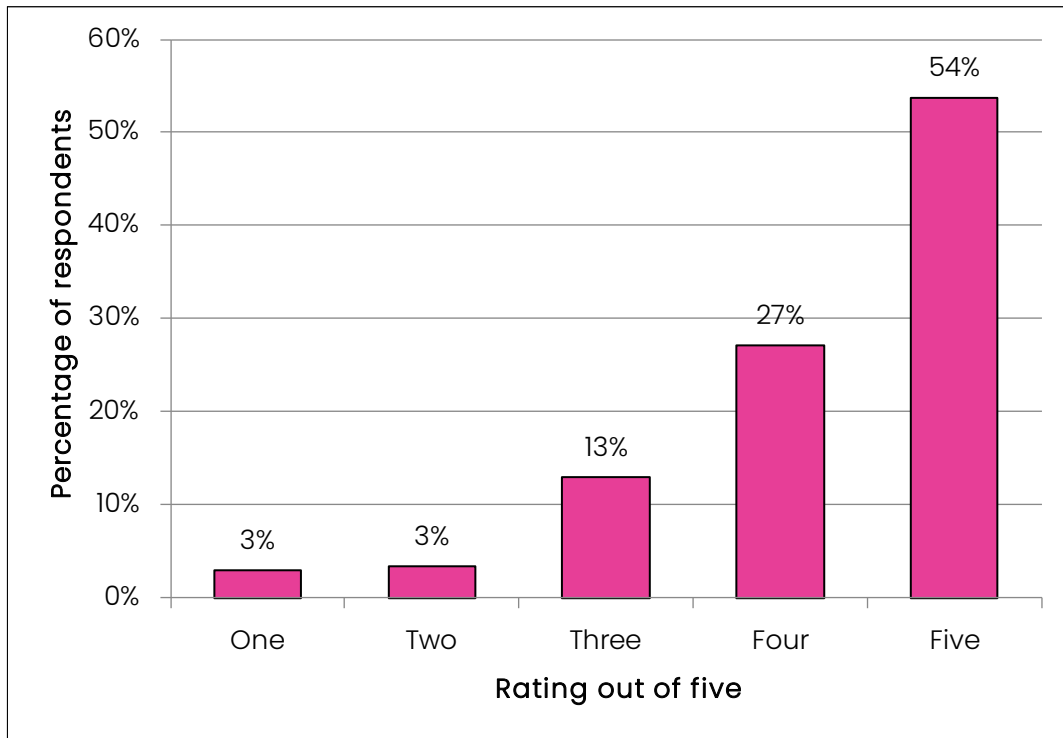


Figure 5. Rating out of five for overall experience of doctors' surgery from 510 patients.

Similarly to ratings for booking appointments, there was a wide range of average ratings across surgeries. For surgeries where we received more than five surveys, this varied from an average of 2.9 to an average of 5.0.

Below are some of the themes found in overall experiences of doctors' surgeries.

## Relationship between booking appointments and overall experience

Within overall experience patients did frequently mention their ability to book appointments and the type of appointments offered. This has already been discussed in this report and can be found in the section "Booking appointments".

It is worth noting that the relationship between overall experience and experiences of booking appointments suggests surgeries where patients rate their experience of booking appointments highly are likely to also rate their overall experience highly too, as displayed in Figure 6.



Figure 6. A scatter graph showing the relationship between average rating of booking appointments and average rating of overall experience for doctors' surgeries where we received more than five surveys. Each green dot on the graph represents a surgery.

### Once I am in it is fine

A common sentiment we heard from patients was *"once you are in it's okay"*. This is again highlighting the importance of patients feeling like they are able to get an appointment when it is needed and able to get an appointment which suits the patient as much as possible. Several shared that once they were able to get an appointment at their doctors' surgery they rarely then experienced any problems. They told us *"I feel well looked after when I get in to see someone"*, *"once you are in it's good [...] the system and the people are polar opposites"*.



*"It can be difficult for people who are feeling unwell or who have mental illness they just give up and don't bother to try again. The reception are lovely. I have just seen a doctor. She was really nice. They do look after you when you get in."*





## Do I feel looked after?

One of the reasons that patients gave for giving lower ratings was feeling like that they were not looked after or that they felt “fobbed off” and “overlooked”. For example one patient told us they “feel isolated and alone” explaining that “I have mental health issues and feel like I’m not getting the support from the surgery that I need. They just refer me to other places”. It is worth noting that this was also mentioned in some responses to questions about booking appointments.

On the other hand, some patients who reported a more positive experience noted that they felt looked after, for example one patient shared that “the doctors are excellent and give you the time you need when you have an appointment without rushing you. It makes you feel that you actually matter”. Others told us that “it feels like I’m a valued patient”. Patients liked it when they felt like they were given “lots of time and attention when I really needed it” and were listened to by staff, this included clinical and non-clinical staff: “the doctor listens and I don’t feel rushed. They helped my daughter with her mental health in the past and took it seriously”. This is also illustrated in the following example:

“It’s wonderful here. The staff are friendly, I feel well looked after and they don’t rush you. When my husband was dying of cancer the doctor used to stop by on his way home to check him which meant a lot.”

## Are staff caring, friendly, and helpful?

Other than experiences with booking appointments, the most common theme in experiences at doctors’ surgeries we found was that staff were praised by patients for being caring, friendly, and helpful. In particular, this was found in most patients who rated their overall experience as five stars out of five.



“I think this is a brilliant surgery, it is the best one I have had. The staff are lovely and they help you, they don’t get cross with you and they are here for their patients.”



Patients we spoke to told us that “the staff have been courteous, understanding and helpful” and that “everyone from the receptionists, to the nurses and doctors genuinely care. [...] they have almost become friends”. Figure 7 displays some of the positive words patients used to describe staff at their doctors’ surgery. The larger the words the more frequently they were used.



Figure 7. A word cloud displaying positive words used by patients to describe staff at doctors’ surgeries.

## Administration and organisation

Finally, patients shared experiences of administration and organisation at their surgeries. Some of these have already been discussed in the appointments section of this report with some patients praising the systems in place and others being more critical.

Again experiences here were mixed, some patients reported positive experiences where their issues were dealt with quickly:

“I spoke to a doctor on the phone and they referred me to Cromer Hospital for a scan. The hospital called me later that same day and said they had a cancellation appointment and I had it done then!”

On the other hand other less happy patients told us about difficulties for example one patient told us: *"I was 1 year late for cancer screening because the doctor filed it in the wrong place"*. While another reported that *"the mis communication from the surgery for my new baby meant I nearly missed the appointment"*. Another patient noted a similar lack of communication around their prescription:

*"I called after I had a bad reaction to a medication they'd prescribed me. The receptionist said a doctor would phone me but no one ever did. I just stopped using that medication and the next time I went to the pharmacy a new medication was waiting for me, no one ever told me about this."*

Other mentions of administrative experiences included:

### *Waiting time at the surgery*

Experiences of this were mixed, when patients found the waiting time long they were less happy with their overall experience. For example:

*"I would give it 5 stars for treatment but only 4 overall as you have to wait a long time in the surgery before you see the doctor and there appears to be no reason for it. Booking an appointment and the wait in the surgery lets them down."*

### *Continuity of care*

Some patients told us they would prefer to see the same clinician for more continuity in their care. The following two experiences highlight this:

Patient A, overall rating five out of five

*"They are all very nice. You always get to see a doctor, they try to see you. I always see the same doctor which is really nice. They know you and your health condition which means you don't have to keep repeating your history."*

Patient B, overall rating four out of five

"I had an issue recently and had to keep having appointments and I saw multiple GPs, there is no continuity. I'd like to be able to see one person for one issue. They make you tell the same story over and over again, it's like they don't read the notes."

### *Staff levels*

As previously mentioned in suggestions for improvements for booking appointments, some patients expressed concerns about the number of staff at their doctors' surgery, with one patient telling us that *"more staff are needed, they feel like they are doing their best but they are so short staffed"*.

# What this means

Patients we spoke to who were most happy with their experiences at their doctors' surgery felt looked after, treated well by staff, and felt like they were able to get appointments as required. They told us that they were able to get through easily on the phone or book appointments using the method they preferred, they were able to always get an appointment which suited them, and in the format they were happy with. On the other hand, those who were less happy told us that they felt overlooked and struggled to get appointments. They were frustrated with long waiting times on the phone and the limited ways of booking appointments, found it difficult to get an appointment either on the day or in the future, and rarely in the format or with the clinician they wanted.

We found a wide range of experiences with booking appointments at doctors' surgeries with some patients being consistently satisfied with their experience while at other surgeries we rarely heard a positive comment about booking appointments. This indicates that good practice from some surgeries could be considered and adopted at surgeries with less satisfied patients. However, we acknowledge that external restrictions such as funding and recruitment and the demographic of the local population can make this more challenging.

As mentioned in our limitations, we understand that this targeted engagement spoke with patients at their doctors' surgery and are thus more likely to have received an in-person appointment and consequently, as our findings suggest, that they are also likely to be more satisfied with their overall experience. However, the results of this project also largely reflect our expectations based on the feedback from other sources we had been receiving prior to undertaking the focused engagement.

The findings from this work also highlighted that more work could be done in managing expectations and communicating with patients about services offered by doctors' surgeries. Over half of the patients we asked told us that they did not look for information or advice anywhere else before contacting their doctors' surgery. While some patients told us that they were having follow up appointments so there was no alternative, others shared that they only ever considered contacting their doctors' surgery. This suggests that more work could be done to encourage patients to consider alternative services or self-help which may benefit them and alleviate pressures on doctors' surgeries. We also found confusion and uncertainty about how appointments were allocated at

surgeries with many patients telling us that receptionists had a significant role in making many clinical decisions. In addition to this, patients found it difficult to name other services which may be offered by their surgery other than GP and nurse appointments. We also heard frustration from some patients that they were unable to get an appointment with their GP and saw appointments with other clinicians such as nurses as inferior.

Linked to the need for more communication with patients, we asked patients how they would like to be kept up to date about news and changes. The most common way was through email, followed by text. Preferred contact methods should be taken into consideration when looking to communicate with patients.

This need for continuing and consistent communication with patients from doctors' surgeries and the Integrated Care System more widely reflects findings in our recent evaluation of Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) in Norfolk and Waveney. In particular, in this evaluation we recommended that doctors' surgeries and their PPGs share information to patients through a variety of platforms. A report for this work can be found on our website here:

[www.healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/report/norfolk-and-waveney-ppg-evaluation-september-2022/](http://www.healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/report/norfolk-and-waveney-ppg-evaluation-september-2022/).

Finally, although our report demonstrates that there is work to be done and improvements to be made, it is worth highlighting that many patients we spoke to were happy with their experiences at their doctors' surgeries. Many patients told us that once they were able to book and have appointments they were satisfied with their experience. Staff were far more frequently praised for their work and for their kindness and support than not.

# Recommendations

1. Individual surgeries to review phone systems and shorten waiting times on phones to reduce patient frustration:
  - Consider whether the message on the phone can be minimised, are up-to-date, and that hold music is at an appropriate volume and not repetitive.
  - Communicate with patients about the most appropriate time to call for their needs. For example, calling for test results or non-urgent questions.
2. Encourage NHS Norfolk and Waveney ICB to create more opportunities for surgeries to share best practice and learning with each other for example at Primary Care Network (PCN) meetings.
3. Surgeries and their Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) to take greater responsibility for communicating with their patients and to actively communicate through appropriate methods for example regular email newsletters and text updates.
4. Continuing and consistent information sharing and engagement with patients, both at an NHS Norfolk and Waveney ICB level, an individual surgery level, and with support from Healthwatch Norfolk. Including communicating with the public about:
  - The most appropriate health service for their concerns.
  - Who makes clinical decisions at surgeries, also address concerns of privacy when sharing details with receptionists.
  - The role and responsibilities of different clinicians at their surgery.
  - Triage and the role of telephone consultations.
5. Recognising the pressure on the wider system, Healthwatch Norfolk to explore patient experiences at other front door health services, such as pharmacies, to ensure that there is sufficient and satisfactory support available.

# Appendix

## Appendix A: Survey

### Surgery Engagement 2022

#### Who are Healthwatch Norfolk?

Healthwatch Norfolk is the independent voice for patients and service users in the county.

We gather your views of health and social care services to ensure they are heard by the people in charge.

#### What is this survey about?

From feedback gathered during our engagement over the last few months we have noticed a rise in the number of patients unhappy with waiting times or unsure of triaging processes. We understand that surgeries are under immense pressure at the moment and hope this work will help contribute to improving patient understanding. We would like to look at whether patients are fully informed about services and the options available to them,

#### How the survey results will be used?

Anonymised survey data will be analysed and reports produced and shared with the surgeries involved. This data will help us review people's experiences of using surgeries and look at what they can do to improve them for the future.

The report will also be publicly available on our website and may be used in other Healthwatch Norfolk communities.

### Closing date 31<sup>st</sup> August 2022

**Survey responses are being collected and analysed by Healthwatch Norfolk. You can read our full privacy policy at:**

**[www.healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/about-us/privacy-statement](http://www.healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/about-us/privacy-statement)**

**Important information:** All feedback will be anonymous unless you wish to leave your name. Your personal information will only be used to contact you about the feedback you have shared with us unless you have specified otherwise. You have the right to ask to remove your personal information from our systems at any time. For more information on which organisations we may share feedback with, please visit [www.healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/privacy-policy](http://www.healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/privacy-policy). To find out more about your privacy rights and how we make use of your information, please visit [www.healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/privacy-policy](http://www.healthwatchnorfolk.co.uk/privacy-policy) or call **01953 856029**.



I consent that my feedback can be shared publicly on Healthwatch Norfolk's website and may also be shared with others to influence change. Please Tick

**1. Date of Visit**

**2. Name of Surgery**

**3. How would you rate your experience of booking appointments at your surgery?**

- 1 Star
- 2 Stars
- 3 Stars
- 4 Stars
- 5 Stars

Comments:

**4. Did you look for information anywhere else before contacting your surgery?**

- Used an online NHS service (including NHS 111 online)
- Used a non-NHS online service or looked for information
- Spoke to a pharmacist
- Tried to treat myself/the person I was making this appointment for (for example with medication)
- Called an NHS helpline such as NHS 111
- Contacted or used another NHS service (for example a walk-in centre or A&E)
- Asked for advice from a friend or family member
- Other ((please specify)
- I did not try to get information or advice (if not why)

Comments:

**5. What do you think happens to your request when you contact your surgery for an appointment? (for example who do you think makes clinical decisions? How is the urgency of request decided?)**

**6. What one thing would improve your experience of booking appointments at your surgery?**

**7. Are you aware of what services your surgery offers? E.g. physio, paramedic, dispensary**

**8. How would you like to receive any updates from the surgery?**

**9. How do you rate your surgery overall?**

- 1 Star
- 2 Star
- 3 Star
- 4 Star
- 5 Star

**10. Tell us more about your experiences with your surgery:**

**11. Are you on a waiting list for hospital treatment?  
(If no skip to the end)**

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

**12. If yes which hospital/department/procedure?**

**13. How long have you been on the waiting list?**

- 0 to 3 months
- More than 3 months but less than 6 months
- More than 6 month but less than a year
- More than a year but less than 2 years
- More than 2 years but less than 3 years
- More than 3 years ( please specify)

Comments:

**14. How would you rate your overall experience at your hospital?**

- 1 Star
- 2 Stars
- 3 Stars
- 4 Stars
- 5 Stars

**17. Tell us more about your experience with the hospital**

About you (Optional)

Name		Email	
Age		Postcode	

\* Questions marked with an asterisk are mandatory.

Would you like your feedback to be posted anonymously? *	Yes/No
I consent to being contacted by HWN regarding my feedback? *	Yes/No
I would like to receive the Healthwatch Norfolk newsletter?*	Yes/No
I confirm that I am over the age of 16 years old?*	Yes/No
If I'm not over the age of 16, I confirm I have parental consent?*	Yes/No

Thank you for your time filling in this survey, please use the freepost envelope to return it.



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