

Healthwatch Hartlepool

Accessing GP Services

Consultation Report

March 2022

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## Executive summary

Hartlepool is one of the most deprived areas in England, ranked 18<sup>th</sup> out of 326 local authority areas and with 7 of the 12 wards in Hartlepool amongst the 10% most deprived in the country.

Healthwatch Hartlepool recognises that many people in Hartlepool are significantly affected by health inequalities and high levels of ill-health. The delivery of supportive and accessible GP services in the town is vitally important and the response to our survey (269 forms returned) demonstrates the level of feeling amongst patients about these issues.

Our survey and consultations highlighted two key areas of concern:

- 1) Accessing GP practices by telephone to make an appointment is difficult, time consuming and for some patients poses significant barriers to accessing primary care services in a timely and appropriate manner.
- 2) Patients generally accept that Covid restrictions which saw most GP consultations delivered either on-line or by telephone were necessary to safeguard patients and health professionals and limit infection. However, the consultation showed significant concerns that the return of face to face appointments is too slow, and many patients feel that on-line or telephone consultations are a barrier to receiving the care, diagnostic rigour and reassurance that face to face consultations bring.

Overall findings from our survey and consultation activities are contained in the summary of findings section, and the feedback from individual practices can be found in Appendix 1.

Our consultation ran from 21<sup>st</sup> February until 18<sup>th</sup> March and has had a higher level of response than any other similar exercise conducted in the last 8 years.

“People’s views come first - especially those who find it hardest to be heard. We will champion what matters to the seldom heard and work with others to find solutions. We are independent and committed to making the biggest difference to residents.”

## Background

### Accessing GP Services Consultation Report

Throughout 2020 and 2021 Healthwatch Hartlepool was receiving feedback from the public on a wide range of health and care related services. By some considerable margin, the most regularly reported area of concern related to patient experience of contacting GP practices and accessing appointments.

During the latter half of 2020 and the early part of 2021 Healthwatch Hartlepool conducted our own #Because We Care Survey in line with Healthwatch England requirements. The results confirmed that over 50% of respondents viewed access to GP services to be a key area of concern. This was the highest individual area identified by residents who replied to our town wide survey. Since then, patients at GP practices in Hartlepool have continued to report difficulties contacting their surgery by telephone to book appointments.

The NHS Long Term Plan set out the ambition to offer “digital first primary care”, where patients use on-line tools to access primary care remotely. Whilst there has been general acceptance that a digital offer will have a part to play in future GP service provision, concerns have been raised about potential impact, particularly on patient privacy and safety and healthcare inequalities.

Prior to the first lockdown on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, the Royal College of GP’s estimated approximately 25% of appointments were carried out remotely. Covid 19 changed that dramatically, with the introduction nationally of a total triage process, and most appointments being delivered remotely

(online, by telephone or by video link) to protect patients and health professionals from the risk of infection.

## Aim of Study

- To provide constructive patient feedback of recent experiences of accessing GP services in Hartlepool
  - To identify and highlight areas and locations in which patients have encountered problems and difficulties in accessing timely and suitable care service provision.
  - To recommend key actions and next steps.

## Methodology

Despite the gradual easing of Covid restriction over recent months, GP access issues have continued to feature strongly in the feedback received from patients in Hartlepool. Consequently, a town wide consultation was launched to gather detailed patient experiences of accessing GP services.

269 completed surveys were returned, our biggest ever response, which demonstrates the strength of feeling amongst patients around this issue.

The town wide survey was made available via survey monkey (97 completed) and hard copies (172 completed) were made available for those digitally excluded. We utilised our network across Hartlepool to promote the survey including presentations to -

- Hartlepool 50+ Forum
- Hartlepool Carers Coffee morning
- Vision Support Lunch Club
- Cobden Area Resident Group
- Hartlepool Mothers Group
- Joint Healthwatch Hartlepool/Community Led Inclusion Partnership (CLIP) Have Your Say Event

All research was undertaken in the period from 21<sup>st</sup> February to 18<sup>th</sup> March 2022.

Particular attention was given to ensuring that the consultation reached carers and those with lived experience of providing care, lifelong conditions, and physical and sensory disabilities. Our activities with the groups and organisations listed above, and particularly the Have Your Say event, delivered jointly with CLIP proved invaluable in ensuring inclusivity.

## Summary of findings:

### Number of responses

Of the 269 surveys returned, the totals from each practice were as follows -

GP Practice	Surveys Returned
McKenzie House	49
Gladstone House	17
Victoria Road	13
Hartfields	4

Wiltshire Way/Throston	3
Wynyard Road	2
Bankhouse	28
Seaton	17
Havelock Grange	28
Chadwick House	35
Millenium Surgery	16
Hart Medical Practice	29
Headland Practice	16
Dr Koh and Trory	7
Total	264 +5 (surgery name not given)

### How Do You Book an Appointment?

Method	Number	% Of total respondents using this method
Telephone	244	91%
In person	27	10%
On-line	18	7%
Text message	2	>1%
Via 111	2	>1%
A carer or family member	1	>1%
Other	7	3%

Most respondents (91%) from all practices use the telephone to book appointments. Some people identified more than one method (e.g., telephone and on-line) but the analysis clearly illustrates the predominant role of the telephone in contacting GP practices and the limited extent to which patients use on-line and other booking methods.

### How Do You Rate Your Experience of Trying to Book an Appointment (1 very poor, 10 very good)

GP Practice	Surveys Returned	Average Rating
McKenzie House	49	1.8
Gladstone House	17	4.4
Victoria Road	13	3.0

Hartfields	4	2.5
Wiltshire Way/Throston	3	1.0
Wynyard Road	2	1.0
Bankhouse	28	5.2
Seaton	17	7.0
Havelock Grange	28	3.8
Chadwick House	35	4.1
Millenium Surgery	16	6.6
Hart Medical Practice	29	3.8
Headland Practice	16	5.8
Dr Koh and Trory	7	7.0
Total	264	4.2

## Summary of Comments on Booking Appointments

Given the unprecedented circumstances we have lived through over the last two years and the impact that Covid 19 has had on all aspects of health care provision, it is not surprising that patients experienced difficulties accessing appointments and other services via their GP practice. However, it is noticeable that average ratings of the experience of booking appointments does vary from practice to practice and some noticeable trends are apparent in the feedback and comments provided. Key areas of concern which were consistently raised in the returned surveys are shown below, and a full summary by practice is contained in Appendix 1.

**Patient comments across all practices confirm that Covid restrictions, have placed considerable strain on appointment system across all practices -**

“Used to be very good, but the phones now take longer to answer” (Dr Koh and Trory)

“During Covid the system which is normally reliable suffered a little but is now returning to normal. (Chadwick House)

“Due to Covid 19 booking an appointment has become very difficult.” (McKenzie)

**Many patients commented that to contact the surgery they needed to be on the phone as soon as lines opened (usually 8am or 8.30am,) and even then, it could take an hour or more to get through, by which time no appointments were available.**

“You need to phone as soon as you can as by 8.30am all appointments have gone, and it is only telephone appointments.” (Hart Medical Practice)

“Told to ring at 8.30am but usually engaged, when you get through you are in a queue.” (Seaton Practice)

“Usually have to listen to recorded message over and over again or voice messages saying please try later as call handlers are busy.” (Bankhouse)

“Luck of the draw, sometimes impossible to get through.” (Havelock Grange)

“It is very difficult to actually get through to book an appointment and if you ring later than 9am there are no appointments available.” (McKenzie House)

“It’s nigh on impossible to get through. I attempted 186 times over 4 days to finally get through and be told there were no appointments and to call at 8.30am” (McKenzie House)

“Everyone has to ring at 8.30am which is stupid as that blocks the lines with everyone ringing at once!” (Hartfields)

**Some patients who worked, and others with childcare and caring responsibilities said that the system and delays referred to above made it extremely difficult for them to book appointments.**

“As I work full time it is a nightmare trying to get an appointment. Phone continually engaged and when you do get through appointments for that day have gone and the receptionist says ring again the following morning.” (Hart Medical Practice)

“Whenever I call before work, I can never get through.” (Chadwick House)

Can only book in early mornings, by the time you get through appointments are gone. Those with mental illness are not taken into consideration. (Hart Medical practice)

“There are no pre-bookable appointments available. You must call at 8.30am each morning, this is unfair for working people.” (Gladstone House)

**Delays/lack of available appointments caused some patients additional pain, discomfort, and anxiety.**

“It is virtually impossible to get an appointment within three weeks, very annoying when one is not an emergency but in considerable pain.” (Bankhouse)

“It’s a nightmare getting an appointment to get my medication.” (McKenzie)

“I can’t manage to get a face to face appointment regarding an ongoing health issue.” (Victoria)

**Patients at some practices said that pre-bookable appointments were not available and for some walk -in and on-line booking had been suspended due to Covid.**

“I don’t like that you can’t pre-book an appointment and have to wait until the next day at 8.30 till 9.00am. surely if you need an appointment, you need an appointment!” (Gladstone House)

Pre-Covid it was walk-in service, now struggle to get appointment as you must ring at 8am with the risk of not getting one.” (Headland)

Takes forever to answer the phone then when they do, are no appointments available. Prior to Covid you could go on-line and book appointments or e consult, but neither now available.” (Bankhouse)

“We cannot pre-book appointments at all. We must phone on a morning and try to book.” ((Havelock)

“Please bring back on-line appointment booking.” (Bankhouse)

**Patients with some health condition reported that the process of booking an appointment was sometimes too demanding to undertake.**

“Having difficulty booking an appointment - My last two attempts took 5 hours 40 minutes and 4 hours 30 minutes. With my dementia and other chronic health problems it is rare to be well enough to do this.” (Havelock Grange)

**Some patients reported having to wait two weeks or more for an appointment.**

“Must phone at 8am, phone always engaged, can try 100 times, may get an appointment 2 or 3 weeks away. (Wynyard)

“The receptionists take a long time to answer you call, then you have to wait two weeks for an appointment.” (Victoria)

“I prefer the option of booking an appointment in advance. I rang my surgery today to book an appointment, first available is in 10 days”. (Millenium)

“Must phone at 8am, phone always engaged, try 100 times. Can look on website. May get an appointment two or three weeks away.” (Wynyard)

**Patients reported being offered nurse practitioner consultations when they wanted to see a GP.**

“Difficult getting to see a doctor, they pass you to a Nurse Practitioner.” (Chadwick)

“Told no GP appointments available at all. Nurse appointments available in 2 weeks!” (Millenium)

“Your often not given an appointment with a doctor but with a nurse, which often means having to make another appointment with a doctor after a wasted appointment with a nurse who can’t deal with the problem.” (McKenzie)

**Patients expressed concerns about triage procedures.**

“Can’t get through, and when you do you have to talk to the receptionist for her to decide if you need an appointment.” (Hart)

“Can’t get past the front desk, they ask why you need to see doctor and what is wrong with you.” (Bankhouse)

“Difficult getting to see a doctor, they try to pass you to a nurse practitioner.” (Chadwick)

“I am almost angry writing this at how difficult it is to get an appointment to see a doctor! I don’t want to speak to a nurse to then be told I need to speak to a doctor!” (McKenzie)

**Some Patients were complimentary about staff and the support they received.**

“Great service, cannot complain with Gladstone House.” (Gladstone House)

“Reception staff are excellent.” (Seaton)

“Receptionist very good, once you eventually get through.” (Victoria)

“The staff are always lovely and helpful.” (Millenium)

**Are there any times when it is difficult to get through to your surgery by phone?**

Yes	No	Don’t Know
205	19	14
86%	8%	6%

101 patients specified mornings as being particularly difficult to get through to the surgery by phone, 86 patients said it was difficult getting through at any time and 15 said that it was most difficult on Monday’s.

**How long after initially contacting your surgery did you wait for your appointment?**

Same day	Next day	2-3 days	4-5 days	7+ days
65	28	43	22	69
29%	12%	19%	10%	30%



29% of patients were able to speak to either a doctor or practice nurse on the day they contacted the surgery. However, after initial triage, 30% of patients waited over 7 days before having a consultation with a doctor or practice nurse.

### Was your appointment on-line or face to face?

As has already been mentioned, national restrictions brought in during the Covid 19 pandemic to protect patients and healthcare workers brought about some significant changes in the way in which services are delivered. In January 2019 the NHS Long Term Plan committed that every patient would have the right to digital-first primary care by 2023/24. The Healthwatch England report -Locked Out: Digitally Excluded People's Experiences of Remote GP Appointments (June 2021) found that people can be digitally excluded for various reasons and those who experience multiple barriers to accessing care particularly so.

Until the pandemic struck in March 2020 most patients still accessed their GP appointments in the traditional face to face manner. Some appointments were conducted over the telephone but very few appointments took place remotely. Consequently, the change to predominantly on-line or telephone appointments was a significant change in the experience of care for many patients.

On-Line and telephone appointments	Face To face appointments
148 (66%)	74 (34%)

As can be seen from the figures shown above, since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 the predominant patient experience of primary care has been through on-line or telephone consultation. This is particularly so for GP consultations and many of the face to consultations which have taken place have been with Practice Nurses and other health care providers rather than GP's. For many patients, this has proved difficult, and a barrier to effective care provision. The average score awarded by patients who had experienced on-line, or telephone conversations was 4 (on a scale of 1 being very poor and 10 very good). Most patients who responded said that telephone consultations were preferable to virtual ones. Feedback from focus groups also indicated that some groups of patients found both on-line and telephone consultations particularly difficult (in some instances impossible) and their ability to access care was adversely affected.

"I find telephone appointments ok for some results, i.e., bloods, urine ok but more complicated results need to see in person." (Chadwick)

"Antibiotics have been prescribed after telephone conversation appointment, then another stronger prescription. Perhaps initial face to face appointment/examination would have resulted in shorter illness/recovery." (Chadwick)

"Much prefer face to face appointments, though all recently telephone." (Seaton)

"Phone appointments are not a substitute for face to face, where have all the doctors gone??" (Hartfields)

"I have a child with Down syndrome, and I often feel being seen face to face is better. Also helps my child build confidence with the GP practice." (Havelock)

"Telephone appointments mean you have to be available all day to wait for an appointment. You don't always have the privacy to talk about personal problems." (Throston)

"Go back to face to face appointments!" (Wynyard)

"On-line appointments are no good, you need a face to face appointment." (Victoria)

“On-line appointments can take twice as long for the GP to get back to you and can make you feel like you have been forgotten.” (Bankhouse)

“I require wheelchair access so don’t mind telephone appointments.” (Millenium)

“I am a carer for someone with additional needs and we were able to decline online and telephone in favour of face to face no problem during Covid restrictions. Surgery was happy to work with us to make sure my relative got the care they needed.” (Gladstone)

“More appointments face to face.” (Koh and Trory)

“I don’t like telephone appointments; I would rather do face to face in the surgery.” (Headland)

“Having Chemotherapy, there are times when I need a face to face appointment, other times given my condition I’m happy with telephone or on-line.” (Hart)

“Face to face visits for more patients, priority access for elderly or less computer literate or those without internet access.” (McKenzie)

Patients generally understood and appreciated why face to face appointments had been curtailed, but there was also a feeling that the re-introduction of face to face consultations was too slow. Many who completed the survey were concerned that they had been unable to see a GP face to face since the start of the pandemic. Some patients reported that it was now easier to get face to face appointments with a GP whist others said that it was still mainly telephone or on-line consultation at their practice.

“I have never been able to see a GP face to face since first lock down” (Chadwick)

“I hope it gets back to normal soon and I can see a doctor.” (Victoria)

“I don’t know what GPs are doing, they need to pull their fingers out and stop hiding behind Covid. The rest of us have to get on with our work and can’t use that as an excuse!” (Havelock)

“I am very disappointed in my GP surgery. I feel they do not offer the service they used to and should. You rarely see a doctor. Covid has changed the GP role. Now they are always behind the scenes.” (Chadwick)

### How Satisfied are you with the time it took to provide your prescription and/or any other services you required?

Very satisfied	Satisfied	Ok	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
70 (31%)	102 (45%)	20 (9%)	11 (5%)	24 (10%)

Of the 227 responses to the question, 76% were either very satisfied or satisfied with the time it took to receive prescriptions and 15% were either very dissatisfied or dissatisfied. Issues leading to dissatisfaction were often related to changes that had been to prescription processes to accommodate covid restrictions.

“Me and my partner were isolated, and I couldn’t get to the surgery to put in my prescription. I phoned and they weren’t happy that I asked if they could put it through this once as I was stuck.” (Hart)

“Should be able to phone in prescriptions.” (Koh and Trory)

“Prescription service is a bit of a challenge, if you have been told to reapply for prescriptions and you email for said medication and the clerk refuses, doesn’t speak to the doctor and doesn’t let

you know, so you are expecting your medication to be at your allocated pharmacy in three days and it isn't there." (Havelock)

"Prescriptions are now slower by 1 day than before which I find a little frustrating, but the service is great!" (Bankhouse)

### Are you invited for an annual health check?

As part of the NHS preventative programme and "staying well" longer activities, all adults in the age range 40-74 should be invited for a health check at least every 5 years. The check involves a simple blood test, looks at lifestyle and focuses on minimising risk of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. Adults with a learning disability should be invited for a health check annually.

Yes	No
65	155

The ability to provide routine health checks has been affected by the pandemic, but patient comments clearly indicate they are valued and seen as a valuable aspect of a practices patient care package.

"I receive yearly bloods and pressure checks." (Chadwick)

"Being invited for a health care check has been a great positive."

### How could access to your GP surgery be improved?

Comments in this section largely reiterate frustrations and concern that have been covered in previous sections around difficulties contact practices by telephone and the provision of telephone/on-line rather than face to face consultations with a GP. Suggestions were also made around how GP surgeries could be made more accessible both in terms of appointment systems and opening hours.

Some patients expressed appreciation of the service and care they had received in difficult circumstances, but many also raised concerns about poor communication, inappropriate staff attitude, a decline in overall standards and accessibility and a desire to return as quickly as possible to face to face GP appointments

A sample of comments that appeared regularly across various practices is shown below -

"All staff at the practice work very hard, but there is a definite decline in service" (Chadwick)

"I think my GP surgery is not how it should be, especially the appointment system." (Victoria)

"Go back to face to face appointments." (Wynyard)

"We need more GP's." (Throston)

"By going to face to face." (Seaton)

"Perhaps Saturday appointments or after hours for people who work as it is difficult to get time off." (Millenium)

"We need more GP's." (Bankhouse)

"Bring back on-line booking, for people who work it is better." (Hart)

"More appointments face to face." (Dr Koh and Trory)

"Varied opening times, ability to book in advance when not urgent" (Gladstone)

“Put it back how it was.” (Hartfields)

“Return to walk-in surgery.” (Headland)

Better availability of appointments without 8.30am nightmare call. Return of pre covid face to face appointments as majority rather than minority.” (Havelock)

“More phone lines, more staff to operate phone lines and the option to book an appointment for other days and not having to ring back daily until an appointment becomes available.” (McKenzie)

## Healthwatch Hartlepool/CLIP GP Access

### Consultation Event

During the consultation period a discussion event was organised and delivered by Healthwatch Hartlepool and the Community Led Inclusion Partnership. The session took place at the South Area Hub on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> March and was attended by 16 people, many of whom had lived experience of caring and a range of disabilities and health conditions. As with other feedback received, participants said that even before the recent pandemic struck, accessing GP appointments, particularly by telephone had often been problematic.

The process by which most practices allocate the majority appointments between 8am and 10am was viewed as a significant hurdle for those with caring responsibilities, parents with children, people who work and people with a variety of conditions, disabilities, and sensory impairment. Virtual and telephone appointments also posed significant difficulties for many of those present and relatives for whom they cared.

The session was attended by the Millenium Surgery Practice Manager who gave a perspective from his surgery and provided information on appointment and consultation processes and the impact of Covid restrictions. He also highlighted the importance of regular and accessible patient information and the benefits of patient involvement in the practice Patient Participation Group.

A summary of participant comments is shown below:



**What The Group Said -**

“Have times later in the day to book appointments, I am too busy between 8 and 10 to spend time on the phone”

“Turn one day a week over to walk in appointments”

“As a Deaf person I can’t make appointments by telephone, I must go to the surgery. On-line and telephone appointments no good. Why don’t all surgeries offer a text service?”

“Information isn’t always available in accessible formats, so there’s things we could do that we don’t know about...so frustrating!!”

“Why do I always have to ask for an interpreter and explain I am Deaf, surely its on my notes and this should just happen?”

“I only get to see a nurse practitioner, not seen GP since lockdown started!”

“I have learnt a lot today; I wasn’t aware of out of hours appointments!”

“Because of the changes during Covid ordering repeat prescriptions is really difficult.”

“Staff need more training, particularly around understanding sensory loss and disability awareness.”

“Surgeries need to communicate better with patients and in ways which are accessible and easy to understand.”

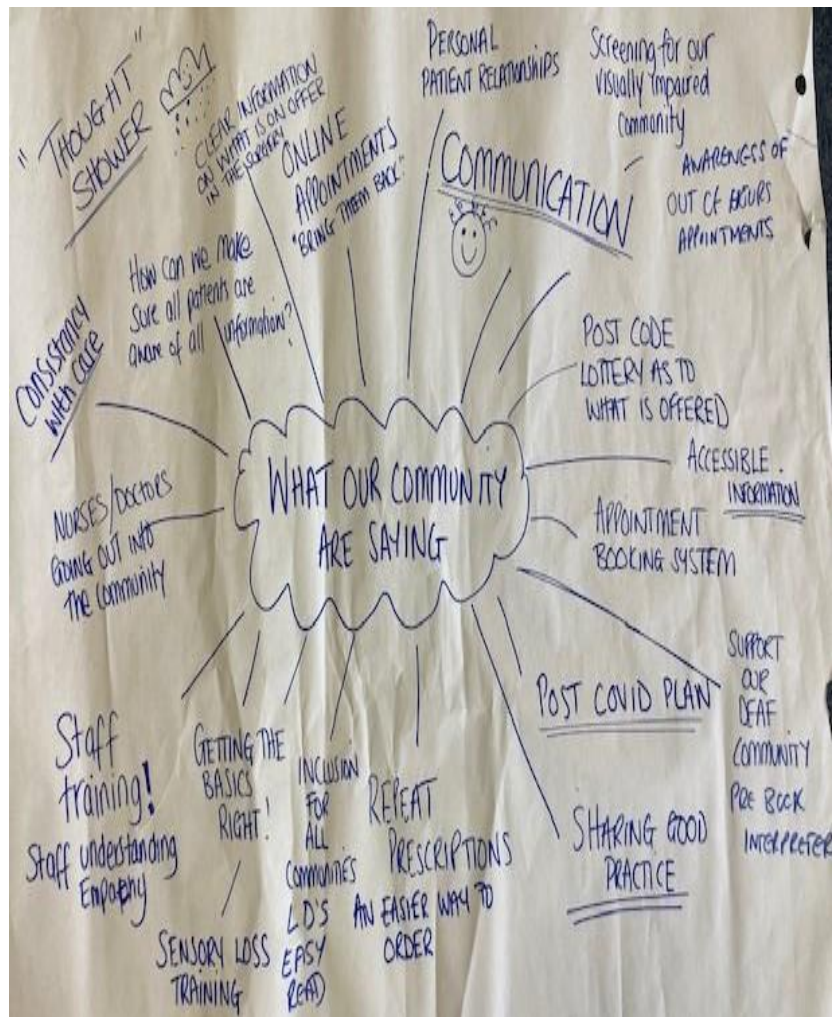
“It is like a postcode lottery, what is offered and how appointments work varies from one practice to another.”

“There are lots of different communities with different communication needs, the way things are working at the moment means some are missing out.”

“The appointment booking systems need to be looked at, and patients must be involved”!

“One size doesn’t fit all; patients are very different and what works for one won’t always work for another.”

“I am partially sighted, accessing technology is impossible. I want to talk to a doctor in person.”



## Final Comments and Recommendations

The findings from the consultation highlight significant difficulties and areas in which improvements are urgently required in the systems by which patients contact GP practices to make appointments. Problems have been exacerbated by Covid restrictions, but it is also clear that many issues with appointment systems pre-date the pandemic. It is evident that the extent of the difficulties experienced by patients at different practices varies considerably, with patients at the McKenzie Group reporting the greatest level of difficulty in accessing surgeries and obtaining timely appointments.

Feedback from the surveys and focus group highlights that a “one size fits all” approach to GP appointments is fundamentally flawed. Patients who work full-time, parents with school age children, patients with caring responsibilities, patients with certain lifelong conditions and disabilities all reported difficulties making phone calls between 8am and 9.30am when most appointments are allocated. On-line booking was a viable alternative for some, but for others who did not have access to the internet or who had a disability that prevented them doing so, this was not an option.

Feedback from patients with disabilities and sensory impairments demonstrates clearly that telephone and internet are not viable forms of communication for some. Practices have a legal and moral obligation to make information and services fully available and inclusive to all.

Information dissemination and communication with patients has been detrimentally affected by covid restrictions and levels of awareness of out of hours and walk-in services are lacking in some area.

Findings overwhelmingly demonstrate a desire from most patients for a return to pre-pandemic routine face to face consultations with GP's. Patients expressed anger, frustration, and concern at the slow rate of the reintroduction of face to face appointments and for some, on-line or telephone appointments are simply not viable.

Patients' generally recognise that on-line appointments and consultations will have a part to play in future service provision, and in some instances may be the patients preferred method. However, the overwhelming view of patients is that first and foremost, when patient choice is for a face to face appointment, then a face to face consultation should happen.

### Recommendations

- All GP practices in Hartlepool should review current appointment processes and in particular their effectiveness in enabling patients to access appointments/consultations quickly. Hartlepool and Stockton Health (HASH) should provide support as appropriate.
- Practices should make extended times available for patients to phone and book appointments, the introduction/re-introduction of on-line bookings and evening/weekend arrangements.
- Patients must be involved in the review process and be consulted about proposed changes to appointment processes.
- All practices should introduce texting services for Deaf patients to use to book appointments and general communication.
- All key practice information must be available in accessible formats appropriate to the needs of patients with sensory impairments and other conditions and disabilities.

- The availability of face to face appointments should be reinstated as quickly as possible in line with government guidelines and safety considerations.
- Practices introduce/re-visit staff training to increase awareness of the communication needs and preferences of different patient groups (Deaf, visually impaired, people living with dementia, learning disability etc).
- Practices ensure that information dissemination systems are as effective as possible, and that patients are fully informed of all appointment (including out of hours) and prescription services and arrangements.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone that has helped us with our consultation including:

Members of the public who completed our survey and shared their views and experiences with us

People who attended and contributed at the consultation event at the South Area Hub

Hartlepool 50+ Forum

Cobden Area Residents group

Hartlepool Mothers Group

Hartlepool Carers

Hartlepool Vision Support Lunch Club

Community Led Inclusion Partnership (CLIP)

Wharton Annex Youth Group

Hartlepool Borough Council and in particular staff at South Area Hub

All our amazing staff and dedicated volunteers