

healthwatch

Milton Keynes



GP APPOINTMENTS AND REGISTRATION IN MILTON KEYNES

1 About Healthwatch Milton Keynes

It is our mission to provide the people of Milton Keynes with a strong, independent voice on health and social care issues, and to influence the way these services are planned, provided and delivered

Healthwatch Milton Keynes is the statutory body that's here to help improve local health and social care services and make sure they work for the people who use them.

We listen to patients' feedback about local services and run projects to collect feedback about specific services or health and social care issues.

One of our statutory powers is to 'Enter and View' local health and social care services and review it from the perspective of patients.

We use this information to write reports and recommendations to service providers and commissioner, letting know what's working well and what could improve patient experience.

We represent the voice of local people on various health and social care forums, including the local Health and Wellbeing Board.

We're part of a national network that reports to NHS England and The Department of Health and Social Care on national health and social care trends.

We also use our knowledge of local health and social care to provide a signposting service.

Established as part of the 2013 Health and Social Care Act, we replaced LINKs (Local Involvement Networks).

2 why we chose to look at GP Practices

We have had a number of people contacting us, through our website and in conversations, with concerns and observations about their ability to access GP appointments, either over the phone or using the online systems available.

We also noticed, while visiting a number of GP practices in Milton Keynes, that registering with a GP practice appeared to be quite a difficult process with some surgeries displaying signs advising that registration documents would be checked with the Home Office. This was not, as we understood it, the way registration should be administered.

We wanted to find out if the issues raised with us, and our own observations, were representative of people's experiences accessing GP appointments or registering with a GP practice in Milton Keynes.

3 How we carried out the review

To help us gain a better understanding of local GP practices, we began with an online survey of information provided on practice websites. One of our volunteers looked at the information GP practices provided around making appointments, whether they offered nurse appointments and how they ran their registration process. Our volunteer also collected and compared the information that is provided for each surgery on the NHS Choices website.

To gain the views of patients, we conducted a small 'Enter and View' programme of visits to five practices which were chosen at random. Our Enter and View Authorised Representatives spoke to consenting patients, in the waiting room, about their experience of accessing appointments with their GP and, where appropriate, how they had found the registration process.

We noticed, while visiting a number of GP surgeries earlier in the year, that there were notices displayed advising that documents provided at registration would be checked with the Home Office. We contacted NHS England to find out whether this was legal, and who was paying for these checks to be carried out. We also spoke to NHS England about what documentation GP practices are required by law to ask for and compared that to what local practices were asking people to provide.

4 Summary of findings...

Milton Keynes has 30 GP practices run by 27 providers with a combined total of 293,328 registered patients (NHS England, 2018). The NHS data, broken down by provider, is included in the appendices.

Our evidence suggests that the current appointment system is not meeting the requirements of the service users. We found that patients at each of the practices we visited, and those people who contact us about their experiences, all report the same issues. These include not being able to book appointments for ongoing care, limited availability of online appointments, excessive wait times when phoning for same day appointments, and the inability to book an appointment with a nurse online.

We have found that documents that people are asked to provide for registration beyond what is required by the NHS of people to provide and this potentially denies access to care to a proportion of Milton Keynes residents. We had noticed earlier, while visiting various practices for other activities, a number of practices were displaying signage that advised

that documents provided at registration would be checked by the Home Office. The person who noticed the signage had sufficient knowledge of NHS requirements to realise that this was not part of the legislation around registration. Subsequently, Healthwatch Milton Keynes contacted NHS England and asked - was this check legal? And who was paying for it?

NHS England advised that checking registration documents with the Home Office was not required by law and also told us that:

“this is not included in the GMS [General Medical Services] contract clauses and is therefore not a contractual obligation for practices. I assume it was carried out at individual practice level.

NHSE does not require practices to divulge patient registration details to the home office as practices/GPs are not gatekeepers for such activity. This action is considered to be a breach of patient confidentiality and is not endorsed by NHSE.”

NHS England have requested that practices remove these notices. We were pleased to note that none of the practices we visited during the Enter and View part of this project were displaying these notices.

As Milton Keynes has a fast-growing population, we feel that steps to improve accessibility to primary health care need to be put in place to ensure that our residents continue to receive appropriate care at the right time.

5 The Local Picture

5.1 Online information

The majority of practice websites are well maintained and appear to be regularly updated. While NHS Choices is not updated often, in some cases not since 2005, there are links to some of the individual practice websites.

All practices offer an online appointment booking service, with some practices also allowing online cancellations, address changes, access to patient records, and repeat prescriptions. There is a large variation in services offered by each practice which, because of the catchment system employed by practices, can lead to a ‘post code lottery’ in terms of access across Milton Keynes.

Since January 2015 all GP practices in England have been free to register new patients who live outside their practice boundary area, but it is for a practice to decide, at the point of registration, whether it is clinically appropriate and practical to register individual patients in that way. It appears that, in Milton Keynes, the practices have decided to remain largely committed to keeping within their old catchment areas and most have a map or description of that area listed on their websites.

For patients this means that, to access GP based care for minor injuries or a specialist COPD or diabetes clinic, they either need to move to an area where that practice offers

the service or get a referral into a non-GP based service. This places a greater burden on those other services, for example, there are two practices that advertise offering chlamydia screening so if you are outside the catchment area of these two practices, a patient would need to go to the Sexual Health Clinic at the hospital which has a very limited appointment making process and are unable to guarantee that a person using the drop-in clinic will be seen that day.

Most GP practices have downloadable forms for registration so that those with access to printers can fill in the forms before going to the practice to register.

The majority of practices ask for ID and proof of address in order to be able to register with them and the most commonly asked for identity documentation is:

- Passport with valid visa
- EU ID card
- Home Office Immigration papers only if accompanied by ID card
- Driving licence (including green paper document) if you were born in the UK
- Birth Certificate if born in the UK and have no photographic ID

While practices will ask for a proof of address, it varies as to what each practice feels is acceptable with some allowing bank statements and others not, some will accept tenancy agreements while others do not. Practices also ask that proof of address documents are dated within a variety of timeframes - usually two to three months.

The requirement for people to produce this type of documentation can lead to a denial of access to primary care. The NHS is very clear that no one should be refused registration or appointments because they don't have a proof of address or personal identification at hand. It is not considered a reasonable ground to refuse registration. This also applies to asylum seekers, refugees, homeless patients or overseas visitors, whether lawfully in the UK or not.

6 What patients told us

We visited 5 GP practices across Milton Keynes, while these were chosen at random we made sure we had a surgery from the East, West, North and South quarters of the borough, and one close to the centre. We asked people in the waiting room if we could speak to them while they were waiting to be seen by their health professional and explained who Healthwatch were, and why we were asking about their experience of accessing appointments.

We asked all patients the same set of questions and spoke to 47 people across the 5 practices. The people we spoke to told us about their experience that day, but most also chose to tell us about previous experiences as well. All patients reported high levels of satisfaction with their treatment, with their only concerns being the pathway to getting the appointment.

The main reason people gave us for not using the online appointment was that they needed to see a nurse and there was no option to make a nurse appointment online. This was an issue for those patients needing to see a nurse on a regular basis, for example patients needing 3-monthly injections but were unable to schedule visits, as many practices don't open appointment bookings that far in advance.

Patients in these cases needed to make a diary reminder to call the practice two to four weeks in advance of needing the appointment to ensure that there was an appointment available within the necessary timeframe for the medication.

Some patients we spoke to had had their appointment on the day we spoke to them made for them by the nurse at their previous week's appointment.

All but one patient spoken to had been registered with their practice for more than 5 years and could not remember their registration process. The one person we spoke to who was a recent arrival told us that, as he had been an asylum seeker, his support worker had arranged his registration with his GP so he had not experienced any issues.

How did you make today's appointment? (online, on the phone, at a previous appointment); How easy was it to make the appointment? (reasonable wait time?)

Telephone appointments

Most of those interviewed had phoned early in the morning and been successful in obtaining appointments for that day. All of these people reported having phoned repeatedly from 8am and being surprised at eventually getting through.

"You can often keep ringing until 8.45 to be told all the appointments have gone"

"I rang four times and got through at 8.15 - I usually can't get an appointment- they're usually all gone by 9 o'clock."

"It took 102 phone calls to get to the automated greeting, but I managed to get an appointment for my son this morning"

"The doctor will call you back in the afternoon if you can't get an appointment - it's useful for something regular, and saves you a visit if you're not feeling well"

One person who needed an appointment urgently was initially offered one the following day, but then chose to have a telephone appointment with a doctor, then as a result, an appointment was made to see a doctor that day as an emergency.

Online booking

Everybody we spoke to that had used the online system thought it was easy to use but didn't offer many appointments and said that it was no good if you wanted to see a GP within the next week. Most patients who had routine or regular appointments with nurses would have liked to have been able to make the appointment online rather than be forced to use the telephone system. One of the reasons we were given for this was that they didn't like to be adding to reception's burden at busy times.

"You have to be quick, you have to keep refreshing as they go quickly, and of course you don't get the GP of your choice"

“They only have a few appointments available to choose from so it’s easier to ring if you need to see a certain doctor or a certain time”

One person told us that they had previously registered to use the online service but had forgotten their password, before they could have another password issued they had been told to bring in their passport as ID. This patient said that they kept forgetting to bring their passport so would probably continue to use the telephone to make appointments. The patient didn’t need to provide ID to see the GP when she attended her appointment so wondered why they couldn’t be given a new password at that point.

Choice of health professional

Most of the people interviewed had appointments with a nurse rather than a doctor. In general patients reported not seeing the same doctor regularly, or said they were used to seeing locums. The majority of patients spoken to were fine with this as they felt the records were kept well enough that it made no difference to their care overall.

“I couldn’t see a doctor today so I’m hoping a nurse can help”

“I would rather see a nurse today than wait a week to see a doctor”

“Quite happy to see the nurse, she’s a prescribing nurse so, fine ...”

When seeing a doctor, most said they were happy to see any doctor. It appeared to be very difficult to arrange to see a specific doctor.

“last time I asked to see a specific doctor I would have had to wait at least 3 weeks”

General satisfaction with the overall appointment system

Comments varied from: -

“It’s a brilliant strategy for getting appointments “;

To: -

“I find it frustrating calling at 8 o’clock and even if you turn up in person, you can get turned away because the calls are taken first.”

“The problem is that there is no choice between on the day or up to 6 weeks (for a longer appointment) I would like the choice of, say, a week.”

Most people commented on the need to phone repeatedly from 8am for an appointment. This was evidently more difficult for some than others. One said she was unable to do this as she was at work by 8am.

Where practices had answerphone messages or phone queueing systems, patients felt fewer frustrations with the system overall. The triage approach operated by receptionists was also appreciated, although we received one unprompted comment that it would be better if the waiting room were farther away from the reception area to help ensure patient privacy and confidentiality.

6.1 Recommendations

Appointments:

As patients across Milton Keynes reported experiencing the same issues and frustrations around accessing appointments, we would encourage practices to come together to design and implement a more patient-centered and user-friendly appointment system. This would help to ensure that systems are consistent.

We would encourage practices to add Nurse or Nurse Practitioner appointments to the online booking system as this is something patients would be very happy to see available and could also relieve some of the pressure on busy reception staff.

Healthwatch would encourage practices to offer patients requiring regular long-term appointments the ability to book these at the time of the previous appointment, as this would reduce the stress and anxiety reported by patients who struggle to find a balance between waiting until appointments are opened and being able to book an appointment within the medically required timeframe.

Registration:

We would encourage practices to review their registration processes to ensure that their requirements do not inadvertently exclude residents from primary health care.

Service provider response

We sent our report to the five (5) practices we visited inviting them to respond to our recommendations. One response has been received and we welcome the action plan and the efforts that Walnut Tree Health Centre are making towards improving the patient experience of registration and appointment access.

Their very thorough response is published alongside this report.