

Meeting Name	Health and Social Care Scrutiny Commission
Date	13 November 2024
Report Title	Primary Care Access
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Introduction and context

Access to general practice care is an ongoing concern for the general public and NHS England (NHSE) and patients report difficulties getting appointments in a timely way, and in seeing their preferred healthcare professional when they do attend. In the report 'What Matters to You? Healthwatch Southwark's Priorities Survey 2024-25', [1] GP access (registering, booking and waiting for appointments) was ranked as the highest healthcare concern by the respondents.

Whilst nationally general practice is delivering a million appointments every day and half a million more every week than pre-COVID-19, [2] we know the pandemic changed the healthcare landscape, and the increase in practice capacity needs to keep pace with growing demand.

The purpose of this paper is to update the committee on what Southwark borough are doing to address this locally.

Background

In order to improve access to primary care services, and the perception of access, in 2022, NHS England (NHSE) launched the 'Primary Care Access Recovery Programme {3} (PCARP). The main priority was to 'tackle the 8am rush', making it easier and quicker for patients to get the help they need.

The programme includes implementing 'Modern General Practice', with the aim of allowing patients to know on the day they make contact, how their request will be handled. This should be based on clinical need and continue to respect their individual preference for a phone call, face-to-face, or online message.

In Southwark, the following improvements have been implemented:

Cloud-based Telephony

100% of practices have been supported to move onto a cloud-based telephony solution, which provides a 'call back' function, so patients don't have to wait in a lengthy queue. Once patients speak to the practice, they will know on the day how their request will be managed:

1. If their need is clinically urgent it should be assessed on the same day by a telephone or face-to-face appointment. If the patient contacts their practice in the afternoon they may be assessed on the next day, where clinically appropriate.
2. If their need is not urgent, but it requires a telephone or face-to-face appointment, this should be scheduled within two weeks.
3. Where appropriate, patients will be signposted to self-care or other local services (eg community pharmacy or self-referral services).
4. The general practice workforce has evolved to include a number of new roles, including Clinical Pharmacist, Health and Well-being Coach, Dietician, Paramedic, First-contact Physiotherapist and Mental Health Practitioner. This means that by providing a little more information at the point of

contact, patients can be directed to the most appropriate healthcare member first time, speeding up their pathway and reducing the number of unnecessary GP appointments.

Pharmacy First and Pharmacy First Plus

The Pharmacy First (PF) scheme means local Pharmacists can carry out consultations and issue antibiotics for one of the seven conditions below, directly to patients when appropriate. Patients can access the service by walking straight into a chemist. They can also be referred by NHS 111, urgent treatment centres, emergency departments or their GP. Those who are not registered with a GP can still access the service.

The seven common conditions managed by the clinical pathways are:

- Uncomplicated UTI
- Shingles
- Impetigo
- Infected insect bites
- Sinusitis
- Sore throat
- Acute otitis media (middle ear infection)

Patients who need more specialist or follow-up care are referred onwards. The aim is to make it easier for people to get the help quickly when they need it, as well as free up millions of GP appointments for patients with greater need and long terms condition management.

There are 57 community pharmacies in Southwark, of those, 51 have already signed up to the scheme. In addition to the conditions above, 45 are signed up to provide hypertension screening and 36 to offer contraceptive services.

Pharmacy First Plus is a locally commissioned service and is provided by Southwark community pharmacists to enable people that don't pay prescription charges to get medicines 'free' from their local pharmacy without needing to visit a GP. A pharmacist can offer quick and local access to advice and treatment about common illnesses without needing an appointment. There is a long list of minor illness conditions from athletes foot to threadworm. Everyone can get free advice from any pharmacist but to be able to get free medicines they need to:

- Sign up to the service at the pharmacy
- Be registered with a Southwark GP
- On low income and entitled to free prescriptions (show their exemption certificate)

There are currently 34 community pharmacies providing this service in Southwark and work continues to encourage the remaining pharmacies to sign up to deliver the scheme.

Benefits include:

- Pharmacists are highly qualified health care professionals who are experts in medicines. They can give the same advice and treatment for common illnesses as GPs.
- Many pharmacies open late during the week and on Saturdays and Sundays.
- It is often quicker to see a pharmacist than wait for a GP appointment.

- No appointment is necessary

Enhanced Access and Extended Primary Care Service.

The Enhanced Access (EA) service in Southwark is a key component of the nationally commissioned Primary Care Network (PCN) Direct Enhanced Service and refers to hours delivered on top of core General Practice Hours (Mon-Fri 08:00-18:30).

The Extended Primary Care Service (EPCS) is delivered via hubs from the Tessa Jowell Health Centre in the south and Bermondsey Spa in the north of the Borough. Care is delivered by GPs, Advanced Nurse Practitioners, Nurses, and other health care professionals. Appointments are for same or next day primary care access, are pre-bookable and are predominantly face to face, with some online and telephone appointments available.

Southwark commissions this additional capacity from the two GP Federations, which provides approximately 16,000 additional appointments per annum. The service offers appointments 8am-8pm Monday to Saturday, as well as 8am-4pm Sunday's and Bank Holidays. Patients are offered the option to be booked into one of these hubs if they are unable to secure an appointment at their registered practice which also offers the flexibility of evening, weekend and bank-holiday appointments.

In addition to routine GP appointments, the weekend service includes all age immunisations and clinics for women's health / cervical screening, two areas of focus for reducing inequalities, whilst enabling access for women with children who otherwise cannot access these services during core GP hours due to work patterns.

The NHS App

There has been strong focus on increasing utilisation of the NHS App within Southwark via promotional SMS campaigns, recommendations shared with practices and more recently the NHS App Week in October 2024. The latest data available shows the percentage of NHS App registered patients has increased from 53.8% in September 2023 to 58.6% in September 2024. The number of total registrations in September 2024 was 187,453 and there has been a gradual trend of higher NHS App registrations every month during the same period.

'NHS App Week', which ran 14th October -18th October 2024 and practice and patient engagement was encouraging.

- 17 GP surgeries across the Southwark borough participated. Each Practice had a visit from the digital team which involved an in-depth introduction to the NHS App to teams, with further training on Proxy access and the patient verification process. Posters and flyers were distributed across the board, with a handy QR code for ease of download.
- The visits also involved direct introduction of the NHS App features to patients. There was further assistance provided to patients for downloading and navigating through the NHS App, in some instances for the first time, to experience the benefits of their NHS records at their fingertips.

GP Practice Websites

The SEL Digital Team has recently collaborated with Borough Change Managers and GP practices to improve the standardisation of practice websites. The Digital Change Manager has been working

closely with each practice to ensure their websites are fully functional and accessible. 18 out of 32 Southwark practices are 100% compliant with the NHSE National Benchmarking toolkit and work is ongoing to reach all practices by the end of the year

Latin American Communities in Southwark

In response to Healthwatch Southwark's 'Access to Health and Social Care services for Latin American Communities in Southwark' [4], SEL ICB Southwark developed an action plan to respond to the 11 recommendations set out in the report. This included improving access to interpreters, providing information on health care services available, liaising with Latin American community organisations to disseminate information and providing information about migrants' entitlements to health and social care in Spanish and Portuguese. The borough team continue to address and monitor improvements in this regard.

Access improvements

Between April and September 2024, Southwark GPs carried out 692,681 appointments. This represents an additional 5228 appointments, or a 0.75% increase compared to the same period in 2023.

Collective Action

Following changes to the GP Contract for 2024/25 by the previous Government, the British Medical Association (BMA) called upon GP partners/contractors to take collective action, which included 10 actions, including 'limit daily patient consultations', 'withdraw permission for data sharing agreements' and 'stop rationing referrals, investigations and to name a few.

No issues have been raised locally in Southwark or disruption to direct patient outward facing care identified. However, we continue to monitor the situation.

References:

1. [What Matters to You? Healthwatch Southwark's Priorities Survey 2024-25](#)
2. [Appointments in General Practice, January 2023 - NHS England Digital](#)
3. [NHS England » Delivery plan for recovering access to primary care](#)
4. [Access to Health and Social Care Services for Latin American Communities in Southwark Report | Healthwatch Southwark](#)