



On Hold: GP Telephone Waiting Times in Greenwich

January 2025

healthwatch
Greenwich

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Introduction

In the past decade, a growing number of GP practices have adopted digital services such as online appointment booking systems and consultation forms, offering patients an alternative way to contact their GP without relying solely on telephone calls. For many, these digital options have made booking appointments quicker and more convenient. However, not everyone has been able to adapt to these changes. Feedback from residents, captured in our monthly reports, consistently highlights that while digital devices like smartphones and computers are increasingly common, significant barriers to access remain¹. Many people still lack access to these technologies, while others, regardless of their technical skills, prefer more traditional methods like phone communication when engaging with health and care services.

The introduction of online booking and consultation aims to ease pressure on telephone lines, reducing waiting times for those who cannot or choose not to use digital methods². However, long waits on the phone remain one of the most frequent complaints we receive from Greenwich residents. Nationally, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) also identifies accessing GP services as a significant concern for patients, with many experiencing extended wait times on phone lines or giving up altogether³. Our previous work has revealed a similar pattern locally, with some residents reporting that they abandon attempts to reach their GP by phone, instead turning to urgent care or A&E services as an alternative.

In 2021, we conducted a mystery shopping exercise to measure telephone waiting times at GP surgeries in Greenwich. Results showed that wait times could range dramatically, from as little as one minute to as long as 36 minutes. Given that long waits on phone lines continue to be a regular source of frustration for residents, we repeated this exercise at the end of 2024.

¹ [What did we hear in September 2024? What action has been taken? | Healthwatch Greenwich](#)

² <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/online-appointment-booking/>

³ Care Quality Commission. (2024). The state of health care and adult social care in England 2023/24

Why We Repeated the Mystery Shopping Exercise

Repeating the exercise in 2024 was important for two key reasons. First, the health and care landscape has evolved significantly since 2021, with an accelerated push towards digital solutions during and after the pandemic. By reassessing phone waiting times at GP practices, we aimed to assess whether digital uptake has effectively reduced pressure on phone lines and improved accessibility for those who depend on or prefer traditional methods.

Second, local and national feedback continues to suggest that phone waiting times to get through to a person, rather than an automated instruction, remain a barrier. Repeating the exercise provided updated data to identify whether these challenges are being addressed or if gaps in service delivery persist.

Methodology

- We requested a list of practices in each Primary Care Network area from the Primary Care Commissioning Team in Greenwich.
- Using this list, we visited the website of each practice to find the telephone number and then called each practice to find out how long it takes to speak to a staff member.
- All phone calls were made between 8:00 and 8:30 a.m. We selected this time frame because residents informed us that this is when staff had advised them to call to increase their chances of securing a same-day appointment.
- Practices were called a minimum of three times between 19 November 2024 and 9 January 2025.

Limitations

- A higher volume of calls and longer wait times are common during 'peak hours' (8 – 8:30 am), which is when our volunteers called. As a result, our findings may not reflect availability during the rest of the day.

An Overview of Primary Care Networks (PCNs) in Greenwich

A primary care network consists of groups of general practices working together with a range of local providers, including community services, social care, and the voluntary sector, to offer personalised, coordinated health and social care to their local populations⁴.

In Greenwich, there are 7 PCNs: Blackheath & Charlton, Eltham Health, Greenwich West, Heritage, Riverview, Unity, and Valentine.

Summary of Findings

Overall, average call waiting times varied considerably.

- Between practices, the average call waiting time ranged from 2 minutes to 57 minutes.
- Overall average waiting time across all practices was 17 minutes.

⁴ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/primary-care/primary-care-networks/>

Waiting Times for Each PCN

Blackheath & Charlton

- The average call waiting time ranged from 3 minutes to 30 minutes.
- 3 of 4 practices in this PCN had a waiting time of over 15 minutes.
- The average call waiting time across the PCN was 17 minutes.

Eltham Health

- The average call waiting time ranged from 3 minutes to 21 minutes.
- 4 of 6 practices in this PCN had a waiting time of under 15 minutes.
- The average call waiting time across the PCN was 11 minutes.

Greenwich West

- The average call waiting time ranged from 5 minutes to 14 minutes.
- 3 of 4 practices in this PCN had a waiting time of under 10 minutes.
- The average call waiting time across the PCN was 9 minutes, the shortest across all PCNs.

Heritage

- The average call waiting time ranged from 2 minutes to 26 minutes.
- 3 of 5 practices in this PCN had a waiting time of under 15 minutes.
- The average call waiting time across the PCN was 13 minutes.

Riverview

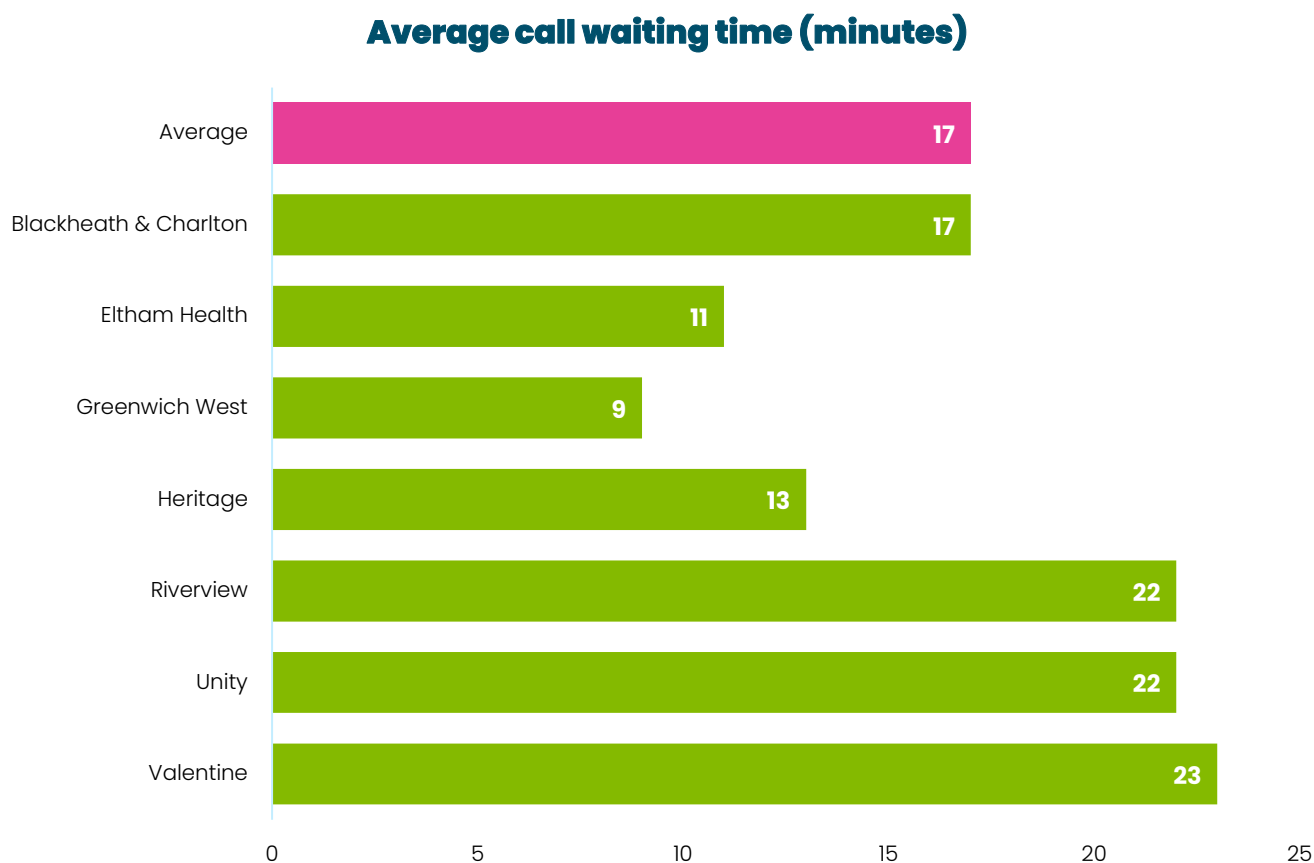
- The average call waiting time ranged from 7 minutes to almost an hour.
- Gallions Reach Health Centre had an average waiting time of 57 minutes, the longest in the dataset.
- The average call waiting time across the PCN was 22 minutes.

Unity

- The average call waiting time ranged from 11 minutes to 43 minutes.
- 3 of 4 practices in this PCN had a waiting time of over 15 minutes.
- The average call waiting time across the PCN was 22 minutes.

Valentine

- The average call waiting time was 23 minutes (Valentine PCN is made up of just one practice).
- This was not the longest wait time compared to individual practices but was the longest wait time across all PCNs on average.



Conclusion

The finding of an overall average call waiting time of 17 minutes—nearly three times longer than the average observed in 2021—suggests a trend in longer telephone waits to access primary care services. This increase aligns with consistent feedback from residents, many of whom express growing frustration over prolonged hold times when attempting to secure appointments, particularly at peak times such as 8:00 AM.

Implications for Health Equity

The implications of these findings are particularly significant for addressing health inequalities. Access to timely primary care is not only essential for diagnosing and treating illnesses but also for preventing conditions from worsening, managing chronic diseases, and promoting overall health and well-being. When barriers such as long call waiting times disproportionately impact already marginalised groups, the result is a widening gap in health outcomes between different groups and communities.

For example, our outreach and engagement activities show that some older residents rely on telephone communication as their primary means of accessing health services due to lower digital adoption rates. Long waits may discourage them from seeking help, leading to delayed diagnoses or less than optimally managed conditions.

For low-income families, financial constraints can limit access to broadband or smartphones⁵. Prolonged waiting times may lead to missed opportunities for prevention or early intervention, disproportionately affecting their health outcomes.

Residents living with some disabilities, such as sight impairments or cognitive limitations, find alternatives to telephone access—such as in-person visits or online systems—unfeasible, making efficient phone services vital for their care.

⁵ <https://healthwatchgreenwich.co.uk/news/2023-05-31/cost-living-barrier-healthcare-most-vulnerable>

Broader Systemic Impact

The ripple effects of these challenges extend beyond individual patient experiences. When residents abandon efforts to reach their GP due to long waits, they often resort to urgent care or A&E services as their only remaining option. This not only misdirects resources intended for emergencies but also increases waiting times for those genuinely in need of urgent care. This inefficiency creates additional stress on an already overburdened hospital system, undermining its ability to deliver equitable, high-quality care.

A big thank you to Healthwatch Greenwich volunteers

Volunteers play a vital role at Healthwatch Greenwich in helping people share their views and experiences and taking part in our research projects.

Thank you to the volunteers who were responsible for supporting us with this Mystery Shopping report.

- Ruhi Begum
- Nimi Binda
- Obre Asiamiah
- Naila Khodabux.

Appendix

Average GP Practice Phone Waiting Time	
Blackheath Standard PMS	3 minutes 1 second
Fairfield PMS	18 minutes 51 seconds
Manor Brook PMS	16 minutes 48 seconds
Vanbrugh Group Practice	30 minutes 13 seconds
Blackheath and Charlton PCN Average	17 minutes 13 seconds
New Eltham Medical Centre	8 minutes 6 seconds
Elmstead Medical Clinic	20 minutes 40 seconds
Eltham Medical Practice	6 minutes 17 seconds
Eltham Palace PMS	9 minutes 24 seconds
Everest Health (Sherard Rd) (Coldharbor Hill)	3 minutes 11 seconds
Primecare PMS (South Street)	18 minutes 26 seconds
Eltham Health PCN Average	11 minutes 1 second
Burney Street PMS	5 minutes 10 seconds
Greenwich Peninsula	13 minutes 59 seconds
Plumbridge Medical Centre	8 minutes 55 seconds
Woodlands Surgery	6 minutes 22 seconds
Greenwich West PCN Average	8 minutes 37 seconds
Bannockburn Surgery	21 minutes 9 seconds
Abbeyslade PMS/Basildon Road	10 minutes 52 seconds
Triveni PMS	25 minutes 52 seconds
Waverley PMS	3 minutes 30 seconds
Plumstead & Wickham Lane Surgery (Mostafa PMS)	2 minutes 19 seconds

Heritage PCN Average	12 minutes 44 seconds
Thamesmead Health Centre	6 minutes 33 seconds
Conway PMS	15 minutes 36 seconds
Royal Arsenal Medical Centre	11 minutes 1 second
St Marks PMS	19 minutes 47 seconds
Gallions Reach Health Centre	56 minutes 36 seconds
Riverview PCN Average	21 minutes 55 seconds
Abbey Wood Surgery	19 minutes 21 seconds
All Saints Medical Centre PMS	10 minutes 36 seconds
Glyndon PMS	15 minutes 41 seconds
Plumstead Health Centre PMS	42 minutes 40 seconds
Unity PCN Average	22 minutes 04 seconds
Valentine Health Partnership	23 minutes 30 seconds
Valentine PCN Average	23 minutes 30 seconds
Overall average	16 minutes 43 seconds

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