



How Can I Help You?

Patient feedback report on
receptionists' attitude at Hackney
GP practices

Introduction

Healthwatch Hackney is the independent health and care watchdog for Hackney residents.

Our mission is to improve health and social care provision and outcomes for people in Hackney by working to ensure that treatment and care is provided with respect and dignity, valuing diversity, encouraging participation and working together.

Some of our [statutory functions](#) are to:

- promote and support the involvement of local people in the commissioning, the provision and scrutiny of local care services.
- enable local people to monitor the standard of provision of local care services and whether and how local care services could and ought to be improved
- obtain the views of local people regarding their needs for, and experiences of, local care services and importantly to make these views known

We run regular bi-weekly [Public Feedback Panels](#) where together with the members of the public and HWH volunteers we scrutinise patients' feedback, good and bad, on local health and social care services and identify issues. The panel monitors risk to patients, equality, and dignity, identifies trends and transforms people's raw experiences into hard evidence.

It is from listening to and analysing patient feedback at the panel that it became apparent that a special report on the GP receptionists' attitude and its effect to patient's accessing services and their satisfaction was needed.

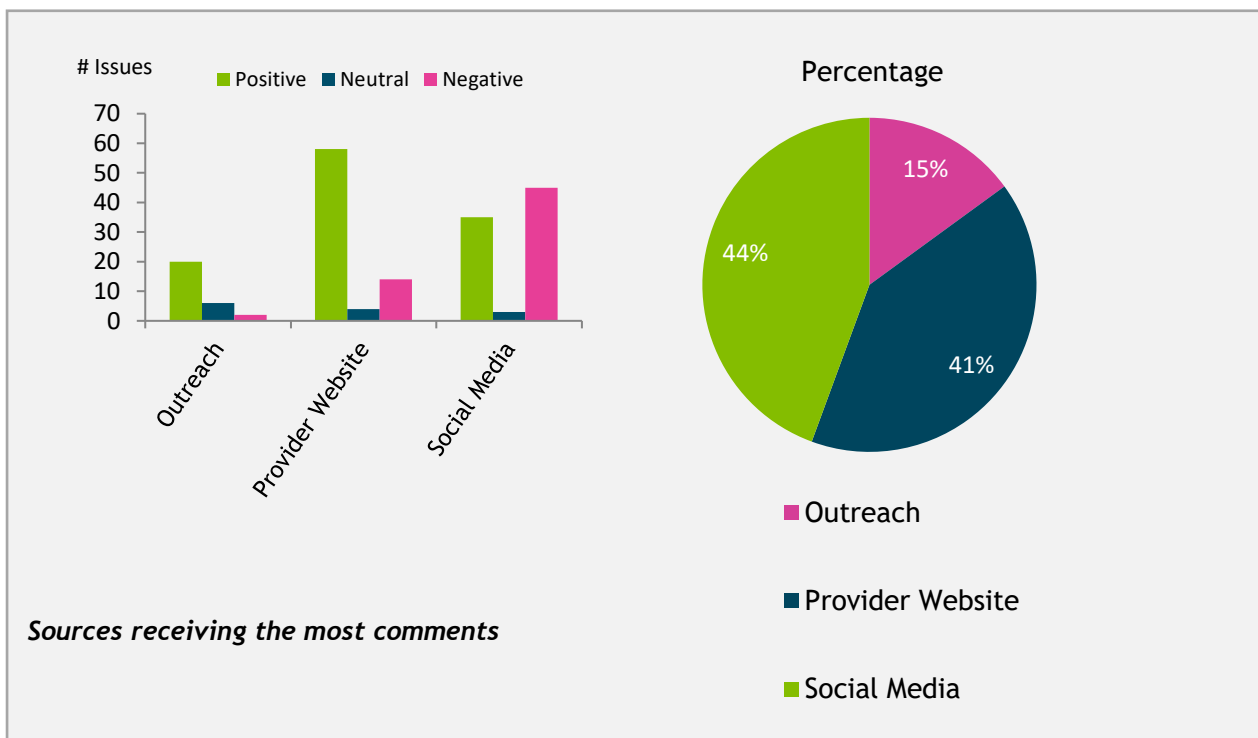
Receptionists and their attitude to patients has featured in many of our previous [Enter and View](#) reports for different health and care services in Hackney. However, the Panel members decided that this issue should be given a special attention to raise awareness and promote good practice.

Receptionists in GP practices are generally the first point of contact for people seeking medical help, acting as gatekeepers to services. They have both an important and difficult role. Patients may be under considerable stress which impacts on how they express themselves. Equally making sure the reception service is welcoming and friendly is vital in ensuring access to healthcare is easy and straight forward. This report is based on feedback from 80 people accessing GP services in Hackney over the period of nine months from November 2019 to July 2020. The report is divided into three parts.

The first part looks at the trends in the feedback, the second analyses the nature of the feedback received, and the third part makes recommendations based on the feedback.

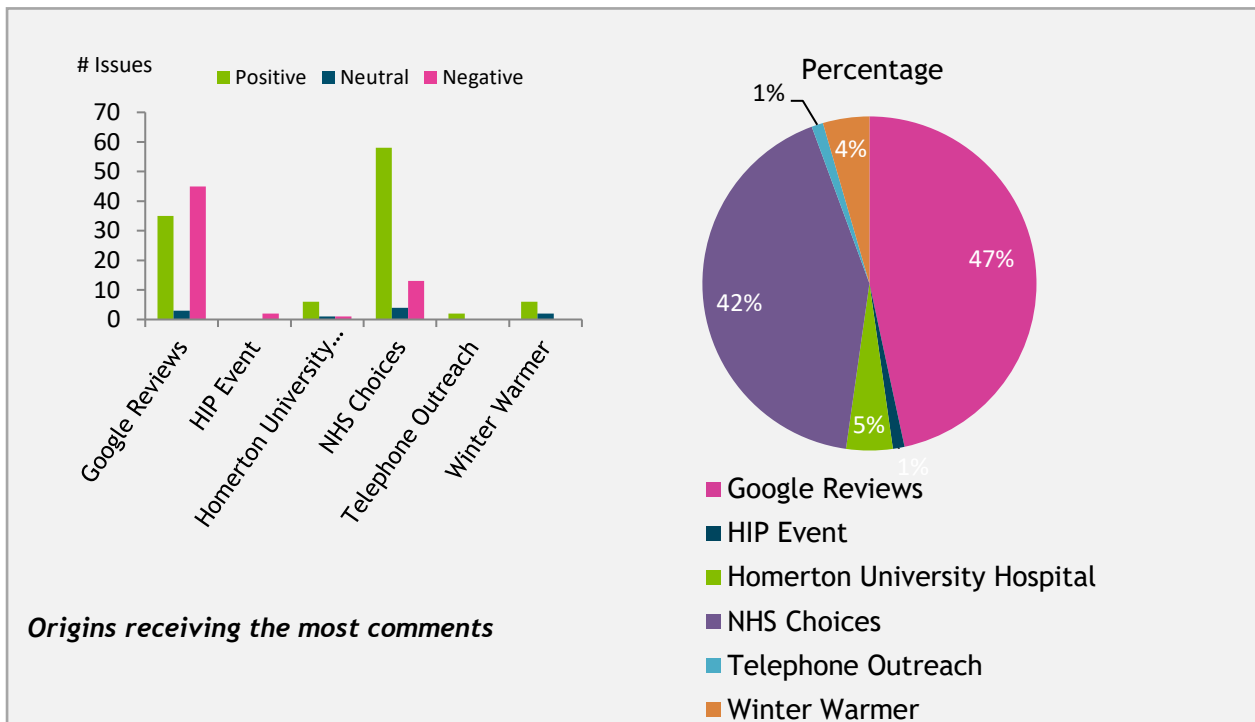
1. Where did we collect the feedback?

1.1 Top Sources



The majority of feedback was obtained online - 44% from social media sites and 41% from NHS websites. The remaining 15% was collected during outreach visits.

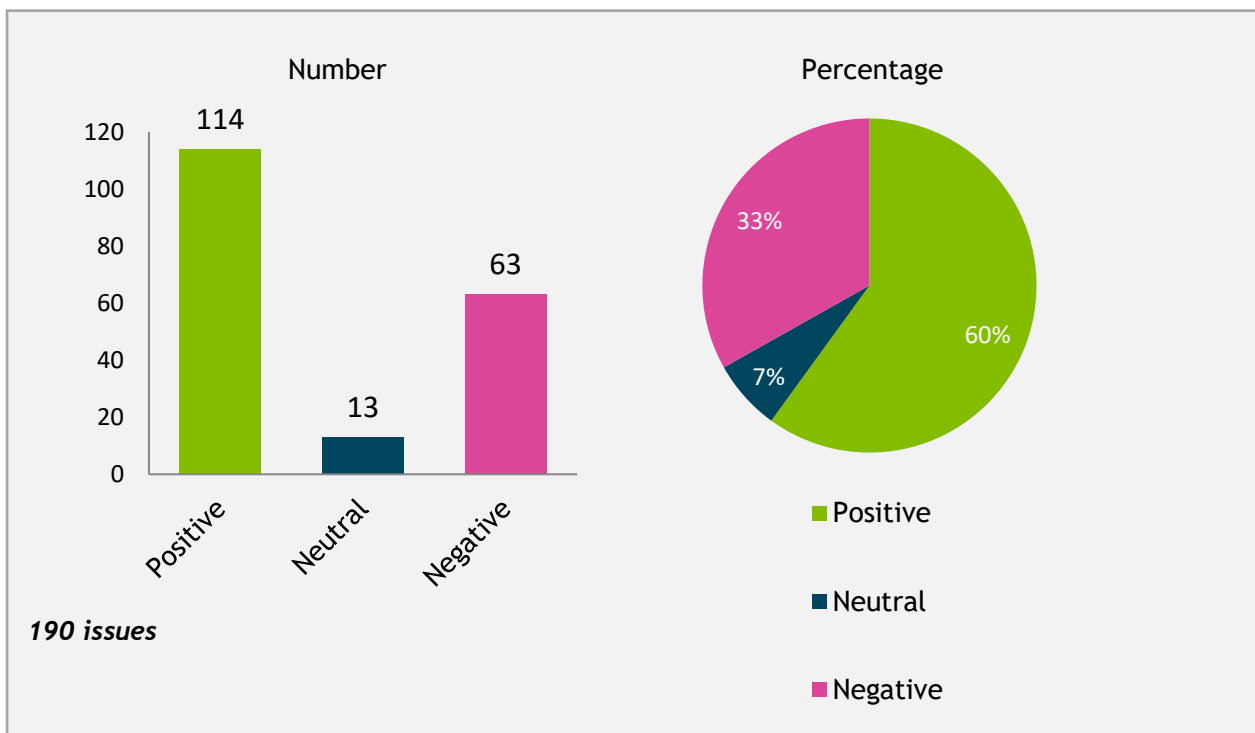
1.2 Top Origins



Google Reviews and NHS Choices are the largest sources of feedback. Venues for outreach include Homerton University Hospital plus local events.

2. Sentiment - How do people feel as a whole?

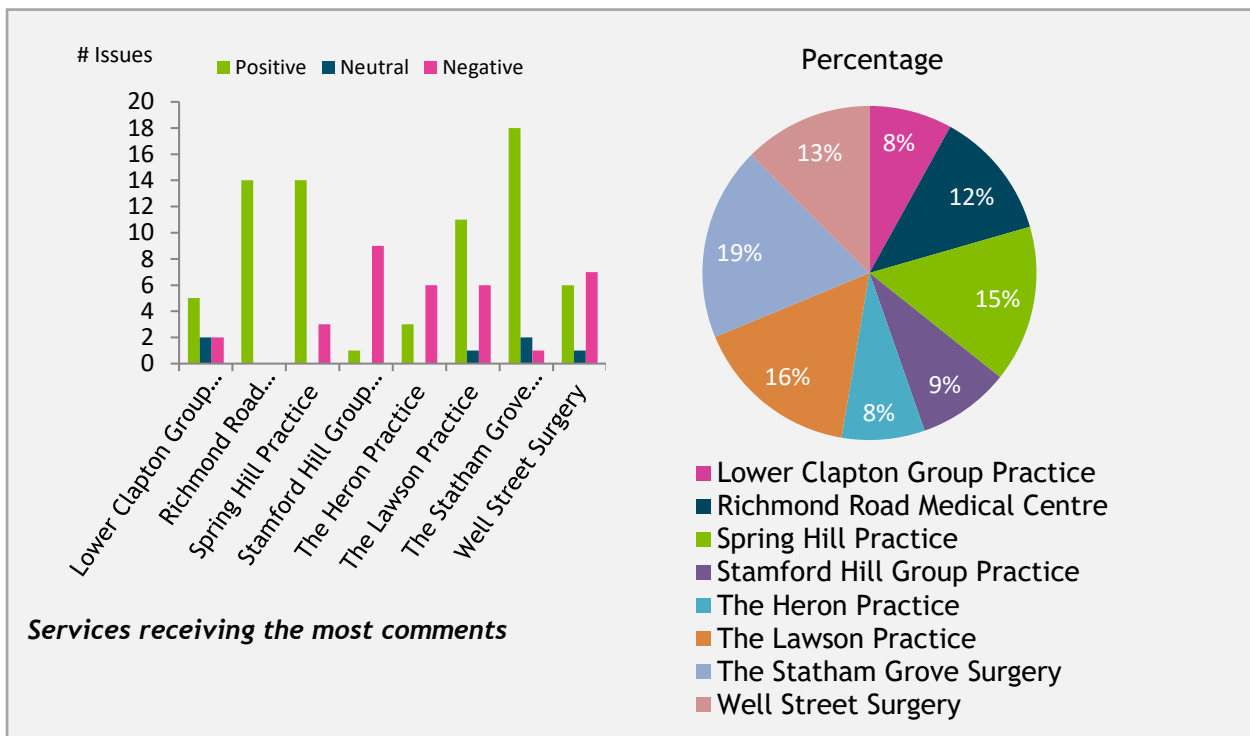
2.1 Sentiment



When reviewing comments, we identified 190 issues about the attitudes of GP reception staff. Of these, almost two thirds are positive (60%) while a third (33%) are negative. The 7% giving neutral responses have encountered both good and bad experiences during their visit to the practice.

3. Services

3.1 Services



Looking at practices, we see that the Statham Grove Surgery, Spring Hill Practice and Richmond Road Medical Centre receive a notable volume and ratio of positive feedback.

Stamford Hill Group Practice receives a notable volume and ratio of negative feedback, while comments suggest sentiment at Well Street Surgery is mixed.

What did people tell us?

COVID-19

In March 2020 in response to the coronavirus pandemic, GP services changed their way of working. It no longer became possible for patients to drop into GP practices to make appointments. Instead patients were asked to call or book appointments online. This made the role of reception staff both more challenging and vital than ever.

Although the responses of patients are from the period that covers the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, we came across only two comments that mentioned the pandemic and the response of GP practices. Both were positive and found the measures taken by the GP practices adequate and the cleaning and sanitising of communal areas were reassuring.

“From the reception staff to the doctors and nurses, everyone was extremely helpful despite these difficult times due to the virus. Not only did they make sure I was immediately seen and treated at a hospital, they have been following up on the progress and still providing care. An infection below the right ear and chin is painful and I'm glad to have this practice within the neighbourhood. Thank you all!” (Spring Hill Practice)

General data:

The nature of interaction between receptionists and people seeking medical help both over the phone and in person was mixed. A significant number of these interactions can be classified as unfavourable from the point of view of patient experience. These were multi-dimensional and are detailed below.

1. Inappropriate communication over the phone

This was one of the main issues highlighted by people trying to access GP services. People complained about their calls not being taken, the phone being slammed down on them before they could talk to the receptionist or the interaction being rude and unprofessional. One experience that highlights each of these issues is that of a patient who said:

*The receptionists at this practice have caused me several times to be reduced to tears after I have spoken to them over the phone. This leaves me feeling even more ill, weak and vulnerable. Their brusque, flippant attitude and dismissive manner is appalling. They have spoken to me very very rudely and are **totally uncaring, unkind, unsympathetic and just downright nasty**. Is there no accountability? Why are management ignoring this serious problem? I dread and cringe every time I have to place a call to this practice. This should not have to be like this. No human being deserves to be treated so badly. I have also experienced waiting nearly 20 minutes to get through, only for the phone to be picked up and immediately clicked off. This has happened to me several times. Clearly, this is a widespread problem that is not being tackled by management.* (Stamford Hill Practice)

In contrast another patient observed:

“While I was waiting for my appointment which was running late, I witnessed the receptionist handle several difficult patients but remained polite and professional throughout. Even a couple of phone calls were handled where she gave clear explanations to a difficult patient whom I could hear sitting several feet away shouting down the phone. She remained professional even after the call had ended.” (Springhill Practice)

This shows that while telephone communication varies from surgery to surgery and cannot be said to be bad overall, there are significant issues that cause real distress to people in need of medical help as the case of Stamford Hill Surgery indicates.

2. Insensitive communication in person

Insensitivity from receptionists is experienced in multiple ways by patients across surgeries. While in some cases the interaction is seen as rude and confrontational, in others it is seen as a chronic issue which forces patients to take drastic decisions like changing surgeries or stopping treatment, as indicated below. **It is apparent that receptionist behaviour and communication styles have lasting effects on patient experience and can become a real impediment to accessing medical help and treatment.** Impersonal, insensitive, confrontational communication in a medical setting can exacerbate a stressful situation, heighten tensions, and leave patients feeling dejected before they can even access medical help.

“This practice deserves no points at all. I am surprised that after reading all these poor reviews, nothing has changed! The receptionists are so so rude, I would like an answer from the practice manager how she can allow sick, elderly and vulnerable people to be subjected to these nasty reception staff. I have personally watched them mocking people, saying racist comments too and I have seen people leaving in tears. NHS ought to be informed about this!” (Stamford Hill Practice, emphasis added)

“When you go there you trying to make appointment they don't listen. I get panic attack, and they say don't raise your voice. They stress you out...they don't listen, the rules are out of date, when are they going to put drinking water there? The reception a lot of them leave you standing there like you not there, we go there to make appointment. They are not the doctors.” (Well Street Surgery)

“Reception staff can be extremely rude and abrupt, and need to brush up on their people skills, especially when, at the end of the day, they're dealing with sick, elderly and vulnerable people. My partner actually changed surgeries because of them. It's something the management really need to look to improve.” (Stamford Hill Practice)

“Ended my medication 5 years earlier than recommended because I hated going in every 3 months - the reception staff mostly act like patients are wasting their time, their indifference is appalling.” (Lawson Practice)

Another way receptionist behaviour affects patients is when their attitude is seen as apathetic as the case below shows. In instances like these, the receptionist’s attitude is seen as robotic and following a rule-book approach rather than a person-centred one that takes context and person into account.

“I had to walk in today at 8am to ask for an appointment and the receptionist said that the doctor will first have to call me and decide whether she needs to see me. I told her that my phone is broken, and I won’t be able to receive any call but she said “Sorry, there is nothing I can do”. I had to insist and push for action so she then said I can come back at 11 and see whether there will be any app available. They have an online app system but I am over 60 years old and have no phone. How would I be able to access the services with this new system?” (Lawson practice)

This contrasts with the positive experience where empathy shown by reception staff is well regarded by patients:

“Called up I got a bit upset with the receptionist, so asked to talk to somebody more in authority ... got a lovely lady on the phone, She was really helpful and cheerful. She made me laugh so much and understood why I was upset about the situation. She hundred percent went out of her way to help me and I am very grateful to her.” (Lawson Practice)

3. Inability to display emotional intelligence to navigate difficult encounters

When patients feel mistreated, potential future encounters are seen through the same prism and can prevent patients from seeking help and cause undue stress even before stepping into the practice.

For example, one of the encounters between receptionists and patients the latter find frustrating and which escalates quickly relates to waiting time. This is a result of institutional issues but must be navigated by receptionists in their interaction with patients. In situations like these it would perhaps be better if the patients are told how long they must wait rather than be told they will be seen shortly.

*“I was told that my doctor didn’t show up yet I was supposed to have an appointment in the morning. Receptionist **didn’t inform how late the doctors going to take** and wasn’t too happy when I said I want to rebook - it as if I have all life waiting unknowingly all day then go to the hospital do the blood test. I’m a working mother I have everything planned ahead and it really irritates me.” (Lower Clapton Group Practice)*

4. Receptionists seen to give medical advice

While active signposting was devised to free GP time and has seen some success, patient feedback suggests that they do not appreciate receptionists as they put it “giving medical advice”. Patients see this as preventing their access to doctors and to legitimate medical needs.

“This is by far the worst GP practice that could possibly exist. From the receptionist through to the management. How do you have receptionist making medical decisions on things they know nothing about. The attitude is very unprofessional, there is a complete disregard for what people might be going through and their lack of training is astounding. One wrong decision could potentially put someone's life in jeopardy, and this is so wrong.” (Dalston Practice)

“Have a sick child. The reception manager said if the child is well enough to go to school she is not able to book him any appointment. She was giving medical advice what she is no way trained to do.” (London Fields Medical Centre)

5. Internal mechanism to foster and encourage accountability

In some instances, patients said that they reported the behaviour of receptionists to their GPs. However, in the absence of a formal mechanism to register complaints of this nature, it is difficult to assure patients that their complaints have been reviewed and resolved through appropriate institutional processes. It is therefore vital to devise internal accountability provision since patients across practices have serious grievances that need to be formally acknowledged and resolved, rather than being posted online.

5. Other unprofessional behaviour

Some patients said the reception staff exhibited unprofessional behaviour like drinking coffee and chatting amongst themselves, texting or talking or not picking up calls. This visible unprofessionalism affects patient experience since they perceive staff to be indulging in private pursuits in a serious, professional environment. As one patient says:

“When I have been waiting in the queue they're just talking, sitting around drinking coffee ignoring phone calls. When they do eventually answer the calls they tell the patient that they will just check something and they return to the other conversation. It is really disappointing and saddening to see.” (Well Street Surgery)

Why this is important

Although receptionists are not medically trained professionals, they are important facilitators in accessing medical services for patients. They act as gatekeepers to GP services and therefore their attitude, communication styles and means of dealing with complex situations affect not only patient experience but also their treatment, as the above examples have shown. Training plays an important role in tackling adversarial and apathetic attitudes by receptionists. While this is provided by the CCG, it is not clear how many reception staff have benefited from training.

A large percentage of the complaints about GP practices with low online ratings were related to receptionists' attitudes. This shows that it is not only a pervasive issue but also something that affects the perception of the GP practice itself. This is significant since online reviews are important when choosing GP practices, and a low online rating can determine whether patients register with a practice even before accessing these services.

Recommendations

All recommendations are based on patients' feedback

1. Customer service training for frontline staff

GP practices should enable receptionist staff to attend regular service-user training, enabling them to better understand their role and responsibilities and ensure patient satisfaction.

2. Clear information around active signposting by the receptionists

To avoid confusion and distress to patients, the practice should ensure all patients on the list are aware of receptionist's role in signposting to other services.

3. Patient complaints

Information about how to complain should be made visible and accessible to everyone. This includes having the information clearly available on the practice website. It should not be necessary to ask for this information at the reception desk for reasons of confidentiality.

Complaints should be dealt with promptly and fairly using a clear process that is open and transparent.

5. Patient feedback on services

Practices to use Patient Participation Groups and other resources such as sending emails or text messages to seek patients' feedback about their services

6. Respecting personal and professional boundaries

The practice to ensure that the frontline staff support patients at all times during their working hours, and that eating, drinking or chatting takes place away from the reception area.