

Out of Hours Messages at GP practices in Barnet

CommUNITY Barnet Primary Care Group: Jan 2021 update

Introduction

Healthwatch Barnet has been assessing the information available to the public about services open to them in Barnet throughout 2019. In February and March, we undertook a significant piece of work for Barnet CCG, where we spoke to 578 members of the public at Urgent Care Centres at both Barnet Hospital and the Royal Free Hospital about what had brought them to Urgent Care.¹ From speaking to Barnet residents, we have learnt that there is a lack of awareness around where to go for support when a GP is not available, i.e. out of hours. Unnecessary queues at Urgent Care mean that patients with critical and emergency health conditions have to wait longer for the care they urgently need. Barnet CCG advises patients with problems that aren't life-threatening to visit their community pharmacist, contact their GP, call NHS 111 for advice or make the most of one of Barnet's walk-in centres, located at Edgware Community Hospital, Finchley Memorial Hospital and Cricklewood Health Centre, wherever possible.

Our engagement on GP access and use of Urgent Care walk-in services has shown us that many people don't know about extended or enhanced access GP appointments, or of the increased functionality and capability of NHS 111. Some people told us that they use Urgent Care when their GP cannot offer an appointment soon enough or if the GP is closed. We know this is putting a lot of pressure on our hospitals - therefore we wanted to follow up on the information GPs are giving to patients about these other services. There are 52 GP surgeries in Barnet. By reviewing their out of hours answerphone messages, we can gain a better understanding of the consistency and content of this information. We wanted to see how many GP surgeries have good, accessible and coherent messages, and to identify where improvements could be made across the borough. Healthwatch Barnet understood that many residents would still ring their GP practice out of hours looking for more information, and that the information presented to patients should be clear, concise, up to date and offer the best options to people. In this report we have highlighted the performance of each GP surgery's answerphone message against our criteria. We have also provided recommendations and comments for all practices. There is also a suggested answerphone message template for all GP surgeries, to ensure consistency.

Methodology

In September 2019, our Primary Care Group volunteers rang every GP practice out of hours when we knew the practice would be shut, so that there should be an out of hours message. We looked for the following information:

1. Was there a recorded message Y/N
2. Did it give surgery opening hours Y/N

¹ <https://www.healthwatchbarnet.co.uk/report/2019-10-21/ae-services-review-barnet>

3. Does the message clearly state the surgery is closed? Y/N
4. Phone 111 Y/N
5. Any further information about 111? Y/N
6. Extended Access/ Out of Hours GP appointment Y/N
7. If “Yes” - were contact details given? Y/N
8. Anywhere else? Such as 999 or specific walk-in centres or Urgent Care Centres Y/N and
9. If “Yes”, please list and record if contact details given

These findings were recorded and brought together on a spreadsheet in order to compare and contrast the content of out of hours messages and produce quantitative data.

Findings

We were pleased to note that there was at least a recorded message for each of the GP practices in Barnet. All 52 GP practices have some sort of recorded message for patients who are ringing out of hours. In one instance, it appeared that the out of hours message had not been switched on and the message said that the call would be answered in time. Our caller rang back later and this had been changed.

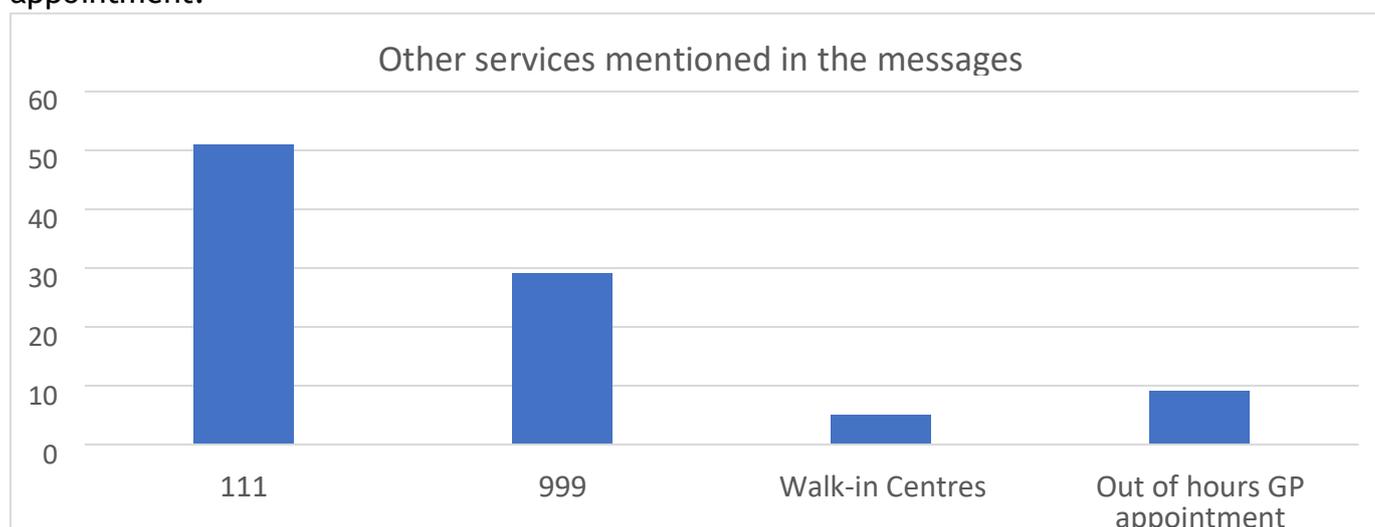
37 of the 52 GP practices gave the surgery opening hours in their phone message: **71.2%**. This is an important piece of information, particularly as many practices these days have extended opening hours on certain days, and these will vary practice-to-practice and day-to-day. Patients will often be ringing up on the assumption that the practice is open, and it is a good opportunity to clarify when patients can expect to ring up and speak to someone from the surgery.



47 of the 52 practices made it clear that the surgery was indeed shut; this is **90.4%** of the total. It might seem obvious, but it is very important to be clear that the practice is indeed shut and not just that the line is busy, or that the practice is temporarily unavailable. It is essential that patients are clear that they will not be able to get through to the practice until the next day or after the weekend. 15 GP practices do not make this clear and this will make things needlessly confusing for patients ringing them.

Considering what we know about NHS 111’s increased capacity and capability in terms of information it can offer to patients locally, as well as services that it can directly refer callers into such as GP Hub and Urgent Care Centre appointments locally in the borough, it is very important that NHS 111 is pushed to the front and centre of options available to patients. This is part of NHS England’s plan for NHS 111 as set out in the NHS Long Term Plan.² We are pleased to report that all but one of the surgeries mentioned NHS 111 in their recorded message: **98.1%**. This is a resoundingly thorough and clear message for patients throughout Barnet which will help create a coherent borough-wide message from primary care. Of these, only 23 are clear that NHS 111 is free to call: **44.2%**. While this is less important as many members of the public do have an understanding that NHS 111 is free to call, it would be really helpful to make sure that this is clearly mentioned when advising patients to use the number and will encourage greater uptake of this option.

9 of the 52 phone messages gave information about Extended/Enhanced/Out of Hours appointments: only **17.3%**. This is relatively low, but we consider this to be less significant than it might have been a couple of years ago. Since 2017, there have been 48,000 extra appointments available to Barnet residents annually, outside of ‘normal’ hours and Healthwatch Barnet have done specific pieces of work around public awareness of these services and how GPs can better make them known. To book an evening or weekend GP appointment you should speak to your GP surgery or call the evening and weekend service directly 020 3948 6809 (phone line operational at evenings and weekends only). However, now that 111 can book patients directly into these appointments as well, it is less important that patients are aware of this number and in fact it could be argued that it might be preferable to just focus on 111 online and NHS 111 to guide patients through the range of services that might be available to them. We felt that preferably, the simplest option for patients in terms of information and options would be to push patients through 111, but this would delay those who would be able to quickly attend an out of hours GP appointment.



Just over half of the 52 practices (29/52) mentioned more urgent options: **55.8%** Nearly all of these urgent options were to remind people that they can ring 999 if their call is urgent or an emergency. This advice is something that is likely to be debated quite fiercely. NHS England is moving towards not using the word ‘emergency’ anymore. It might very sensibly be argued that as many patients as possible are triaged through NHS 111 so patients are signposted more

² <https://www.england.nhs.uk/urgent-emergency-care/nhs-111/next-steps-for-nhs-111/>

effectively, and do not pick the wrong service. If it becomes apparent that a caller is truly in need of very urgent care, then they will be guided to an appropriate service as NHS 111 can book appointments for patients at Urgent Care Centres, allowing patients to turn up having already been triaged over the phone or online. They can of course, also send for an ambulance if necessary. NHS 111 will need to have the necessary capacity to deal with this volume of calls and part of this process also includes pushing patients increasingly towards the website and NHS 111 app.

One of the trends that we did identify as part of these calls was regarding the speed and clarity of the message. For at least 8 of the 52 practice messages, our volunteers found that the message was not clear enough, was spoken too fast and was not understandable throughout. 15% of the messages were completely difficult to understand. This is a very basic but vital element that can easily be improved upon. Not only is this good practice generally, it is likely to help many of the more vulnerable and harder to reach patients who might otherwise rely on a clear spoken message. This includes most specifically elderly residents, those who are hard of hearing and patients who do not have English as a first language, but ultimately all patients will benefit from a clearly spoken and communicated message.

Conclusions

The conclusions that we can draw from these findings are as follows. It is important to note that overall, these findings were reassuring in that there were few very poor out of hours messages. All practices had one, and nearly every single one mentioned NHS 111 which is in a position to do more for patients that access its services than ever before. A significant number of the messages could be very easily improved upon by adding in basic and helpful information such as the fact that they are actually closed and a brief run-down of their opening hours.

There is however needless and unhelpful variation in the choice, amount and quality of the information being made available to patients of GP surgeries across Barnet. Whereas one practice message simply states that the practice is shut and will reopen the next day, some go into much more detail about the variety of options available to patients - perhaps too much.

The other conclusion we made was that regardless of the message itself, many of the messages are too quick, too rushed and too unclear, occasionally with strong accents and sometimes using needlessly medical jargon. As well as reviewing the messages for the information they share, it would be worth re-recording some of these messages to allow their meaning to be as usefully understood as possible. It might be worth repeating key pieces of information that felt particularly important.

Beyond recommending NHS 111, we saw that there was a great variety in the other options offered to patients. Commissioners and service providers will want to take a view on how important this is, and much of this depends on how able the system feels NHS 111 is to adequately triage, signpost and arrange services and appointments for patients as necessary and in good time. As part of the follow up to our research (led by the co-chairs of the Primary Care Group), we have been liaising with the 111 operations team in the North West London area and have been helpfully speaking to the Director of Operations of this service. They shared with us that while in theory 111 is in a position to speak to any caller, it is still also worth reminding and alerting patients to some of the other services available to them, particularly community pharmacies who are able to offer clinical

assessment and over the counter medication. It is worth ensuring that patients are made aware of which pharmacies are open out of hours and on bank holidays. The Primary Care Group will continue their discussions with NHS 111 management. Having shared this report with partners in March 2020, we received feedback from several practice managers and Barnet Federated GPs that 999 should still be kept as an option and we have therefore kept this as part of our suggested message and options.

As a part of our conclusions, we have been formulating our own recommended message that might be adopted standardly throughout Barnet as the basis for practices out of hours messages. It is understood that some GP practices have more technologically advanced telephony systems with the press button options to direct patients as necessary. Rather than expect every GP practice to adhere to a set message, might it be possible to direct patients to a borough wide message following any practice specific information? This could be supported by the Federation or the CCG and would ensure a clear, simple message and could also support a more sophisticated system of options for patients.

The Primary Care Group's sense, given our focus and experience on patient communications and understanding, is that the simplest, clearest and most up-to-date option for patients should be followed. If possible, NHS 111 should be the focus of the message as they will direct patients to the appropriate service; this should include directing people to NHS 111 website and app. We have kept 999 as a recommendation following feedback from practices in 2020.

Recommendations

- All GP practices in Barnet should review their out of hours messages.
- There should be one standard out of hours phone message for all GP practices with only practice-specific information at the start of the message being different.
- Each message should clearly state the name of the practice, and the opening hours.
- Ideally, a system would then allow patients to choose some options to adequately signpost them - either to making an appointment, to options closer to home or to NHS 111 and to ensure that patients know that 111 is free to call.
- It is feasible that practices could divert out of hours callers to a Barnet-wide information system to allow for one set of information and an appropriate option-based system.
- It should be as short and to the point as possible, but the recording should be spoken slowly and in as plain English as possible.
- Below we have a suggested initial voice message and in Appendix 1 have laid out a possible flow chart. We note that Walk-in Centres will be renamed in the future.

Suggested standardised message for GP answerphones

Hello, this is XX surgery. We are closed. Our opening hours are xxx to xxx xxxday to xxxday.

For more information about the surgery, or to book a regular appointment, please go to the practice website or please press 1 to listen to more information about your options.

If your call is an Emergency please dial 999. If your call is urgent, please go to NHS 111 online at 111.nhs.uk or put down the phone and call 111 to speak to someone on the phone. These calls are free.

This service will give advice on self-treatment over the phone, might suggest a visit to an Urgent Care Centre, arrange a doctor's appointment, send a doctor to visit or send an ambulance if necessary. Optional: Depending on system preference, there can be information about pharmacies, extended hours appointments and walk-in centres here at the end of the call.

This service will give advice on self-treatment over the phone, might suggest a visit to an Urgent Care Centre, arrange a doctor's appointment, send a doctor to visit or send an ambulance if necessary.

Optional: Depending on system preference, there can be information about pharmacies, extended hours appointments and walk-in centres here at the end of the call.

Acknowledgements

Sue Blain, Stewart Block, Janice Tausig, Margaret Singer, Derrick Edgerton, Helen Andrews, Asmina Remtulla, Lyn Tobin, Diana Abramova and Ganesh Dutt; CommUNITY Barnet Primary Care Group and Rory Cooper.

Blu Reynolds, Director of Operations, London Central & West, Unscheduled Care Collaborative
Michael Whitworth, Chief Executive Officer, Barnet Federated GPs CIC

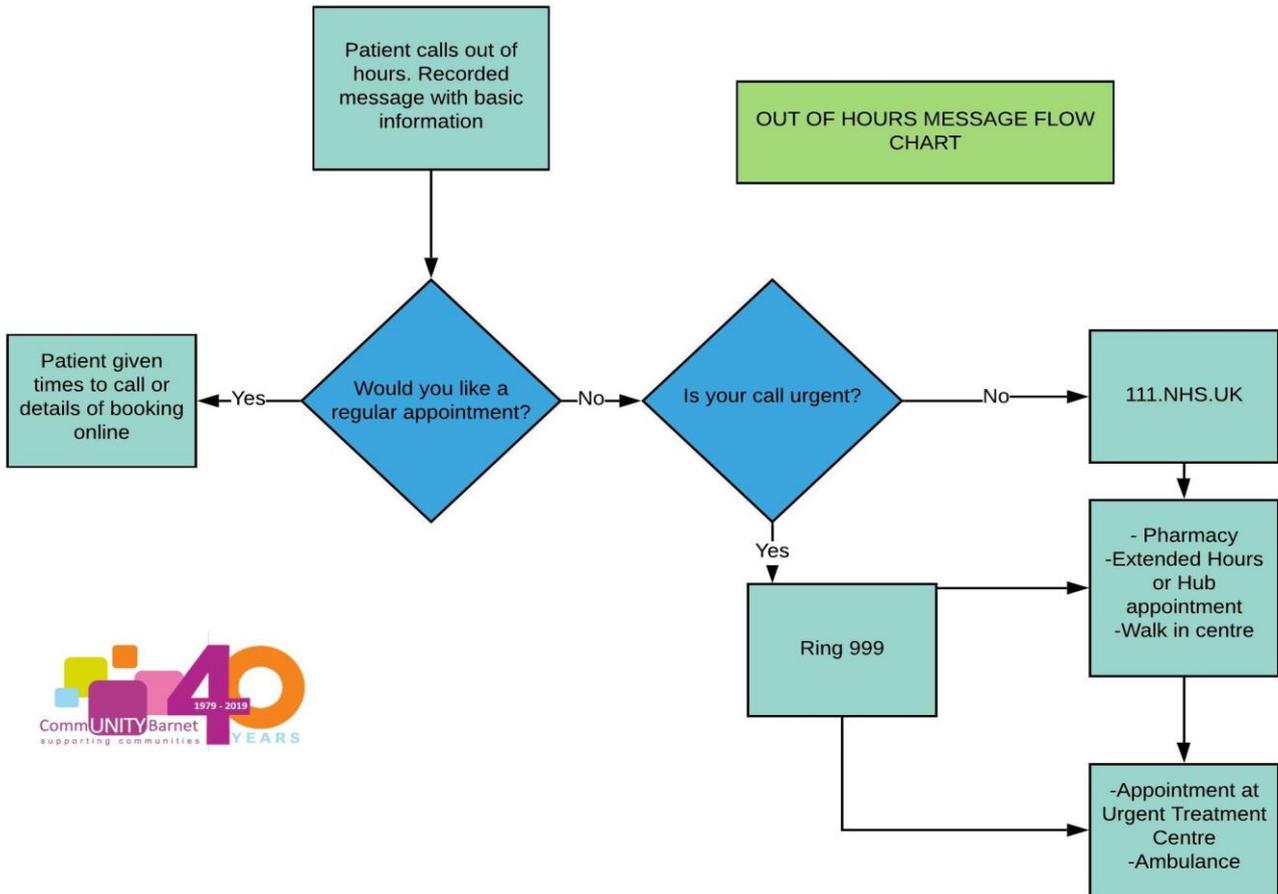
CommUNITY Barnet Primary Care Group

The Primary Care Group (PCG) consists of volunteers who are interested in ways that they can assist Barnet Primary Care service providers to improve their services to patients. The PCG co-chaired by Sue Blain and Stewart Block, has led several exciting projects in recent years with a constant emphasis on patient perspective, understanding and the communications that patients receive. Throughout the last year, the group have worked productively with teams at Barnet CCG and Barnet Federated GPs as well as working directly with a dozen different practices and Practice Managers, to analyse and improve patient access and experience. The Primary Care Group has also led the way in helping offer simple, practical solutions as well as recommendations.

<https://www.communitybarnet.org.uk/portfolio/community-barnet-primary-care-group>

Appendix 1

Out of hours message flow chart



Appendix 2

Question template for volunteers conducting calls

GP Out of Hours Phone message information

The purpose of this exercise is to find out how clearly GP practice answerphone messages adequately direct patients to the right services and how fully.

We have been reviewing the information on GP websites and the exercise here is to find out how much information patients can gather by just ringing their GP practice and whether 111/ extended hours/ other services are mentioned.

Phone on a Sunday morning or when suits you that is out of hours for the practice you are ringing.

Phone GP surgery and listen to the recorded message if there is one. Each message is likely to be no more than a few minutes long so won't take very long.

Questionnaire:

1.	Was there a recorded message Y/N
2.	Did it give surgery opening hours Y/N
3.	Does the message clearly state the surgery is closed? Y/N
4.	Phone 111 Y/N
5.	Any further information about 111?
6.	Extended Access/ Out of Hours GP appointment Y/N
7.	If "Yes" - were contact details given? Y/N
8.	Anywhere else? Such as 999 or specific Walk in Centres or Urgent Care Centres Y/N and details
9.	If "Yes", please list and record if contact details given