Summary

Over the past 18 months during the Covid-19 Pandemic, the practice has experienced a significant increase and pressure on the telephone system which was originally installed in 2017. The telephone infrastructure built in 2016 / 2017 was designed to meet the demands on the service at that time and our population of 12400 registered patients. The average number of calls we received in 2017 per week was around 1238. In March 2020, we had a population of 13,000 but experienced a significant between 2815 – 5807 calls during the first few weeks of the national lockdown. At its peak, we experienced up to 7887 calls in August 2020 and the phone system and staff were unable to manage the demand which reduced the patients overall experience and increased the number of complaints we received about accessing us by telephone.

The report provides information to patients and staff about the practice measures over the recent years to improve the experience for patients accessing the practice and reduce the demand on the phone lines. It also provides information how we responded to the national changes during the pandemic and our plan to improve our telephone system and patient access.

2016

In 2016, we piloted a walk-in clinic in 2016 to avoid patients having to ring on the day for urgent appointments and set up a walk-in service where patients were able to sit and wait for urgent on the day problems. We had between 250- 350 patients accessing the service each week who avoided having to ring the practice on the day.

In March 2021, we went into lockdown in response to the Covid 10 Pandemic and national lockdown measures were implemented to protect the NHS and the safety of patients and our workforce.

2017-2020 – Improving online access

Between 2017 – 2020 we implemented several new changes to further reduce the number of calls coming though and developed our online services. This included registering patients for online services to book appointments and request prescriptions online.

In 2017, we had 32.2% of patients were registered for online services with 2.6% booking appointments online. During the past 4 years, we have worked hard to register patients for online services and we now have 58.4% registered with 13.6% booking their appointments online.

Patients also contacted the practice to request their repeat prescriptions and in 2017, 76% of patients registered for online services requested their prescriptions online. We now have 99.6% of our patients registered for online services requesting their repeat prescription online. We have a designated phone line at both sites and have invested in additional hours for a prescription clerk to deal with prescription queries. This has removed the calls coming through our appointment lines.

2020-2021 -Patient satisfaction

Our average satisfaction rate from the national GP survey has been between 52-53% and we have seen an increase in the past 12-18 months of complaints about accessing us on the phone. We have identified several challenges and faults with our phone line which have impacted on patients being able to access us.

Why has there been an increased demand on the phone?

* Online booking was suspended in response to NHS England in March 2020 meaning 58.4% of our registered patients for online service now had to ring to come into the surgery.
* We were unable to allow open access into the surgery due to the Covid Pandemic for patients to book appointments in person. We were therefore asking patients to ring the surgery.
* We had to triaging patients over the telephone to reduce the number of face to face appointments during the Covid Pandemic as directed by NHS England in March 2020. All our clinicians were using the phone lines to call patients which impacted on the line capacity for patients calling in.
* Large volume of calls was received each day during March – October 2020 relating to National Shielding Guidelines
* Large volume of calls was received from patients requesting their Covid vaccinations prior to and during the covid vaccination programme which started in Dec 2020
* Large volume of calls was received from patients booking their vaccination appointment each week. We had on average between 250-500 vaccination appointments to book and were unable to offer them online initially due the way clinics had to be set up and directed by NHS England.
* We faced workforce challenges with staff isolating due to infection or shielding in addition to many of our staff having to work remotely for childcare reasons during the Covid pandemic.
* Calls were taking longer due to the complexity of some of the queries around the Covid Pandemic
* We were experiencing an unprecedented increase in abuse towards our receptionists when patients struggled to get through and wanted to complain which took longer to deal with the call.
* We recruited 4 new reception staff during the Covid Pandemic to increase the capacity within the team. Whilst this has been a positive step, it has taken time to train them to deal with calls quickly due to some of the complex queries we were dealing with.
* We had to ensure our staff were working in a Covid secure environment during the Pandemic and had to transfer our Grange calls to our Colton Mill site to handle the calls. This was following a risk assessment at the Grange meeting the social distancing measures.

What have our patients told us?

* Long wait times to get through to reception
* Phone ringing for hours and no answer
* Phone being cut off after waiting online
* No queuing system to know how many people are waiting in the queue
* No music whilst on hold
* Not enough messages whilst waiting on the phone
* Calls being handled at Colton Mill for the Grange MC
* Not being able to book online
* No appointments

How have we tried to resolve the telephone access problems?

* Whilst we have been adapting throughout the pandemic in response to national guidance, we have also been working hard to find our own solutions to reduce the calls to the practice and resolve the problems patients were facing getting though on the phone
* BT engineers were unable to resolve the problem with the system and it was identified that the infrastructure designed in 2017 was unsuitable for the demand we face now
* We have been working with a new provider to build a new infrastructure to install a new phone system that will hopefully cope with the demand.
* Due to the pandemic, installing a new phone system has taken longer than expected and delays switching to the new system have been outside our control. Our new telephone system is expected to go live on the 1 September 2021.
* We have recruited 4 new receptionists during the pandemic in 2020 and recently taken on another full-time receptionist in 2021 to increase the number to take calls. We will go from 5 call handlers to 7 Monday to Friday (includes prescription clerks)
* We have provided training for all our reception team on customer service and dealing with calls.
* In gradually increased the online booking of appointments as lockdown measures were eased.

We have returned to face to face appointments and now offer telephone reviews where they are clinically indicated or follow ups. This has already reduced the calls on the system.

We introduced E Consultations in April 2020 as an alternative online consultation. This service offers online services for patients to request sick notes, check test results or make an enquiry about a medical problem. On average, we deal with between 130-180 each week. These would have previously been patients contacting us on the phone.

We have installed a new messaging system that allows our receptionists and clinicians to send patients messages with instructions, leaflets, website links or provide advice when we are unable to get through to you by phone. This has reduced the number of call backs from patients when we have been able to contact patients.

The new messaging service is only available for patients with a mobile, so we have been increasing the number of patients who have a mobile recorded on their records. This has also allowed us to reduce our carbon footprint by reducing the number of letters we send out.

What are the new features of the phone system?

We have listened to patients’ feedback and have ensured this is incorporated into the new system.

* Place patients in a queue and let you know how many patients are in front of you
* We can change messages instantly to ensure we can communicate changes immediately with our patients
* We will have music whilst patients are on hold
* Our staff will be assigned a unique log in ID which will allow us to audit staff when we need to listen to calls or whilst we are training staff.
* We will have a call waiting board in reception so our team can see the number of calls queuing, the wait time and the number of abandoned calls. This will ensure staff are always aware of the demands from patients.
* We will be able to run audits and produce regular reports which will make it easier for us to adapt our resource to peak times
* We will have a significant increase in the capacity to take high volumes of calls with the new infrastructure. This will stop patients being unable to get through or cut off.
* We will be able to have staff work remotely with the new phone system to reduce the impact of staff shortages with isolation guidelines during Covid Pandemic

What will we do next?

* On the 1st September our NEW phone system will be installed
* Our staff will receive training on the new system
* We will run regular reports to monitor the activity and adapt how we handle calls
* We will monitor patient and staff feedback on the new system to identify any problems and resolves them quickly
* We are recruiting another member of the team and have changed the number of call handlers on different days and peak times
* We will continue to offer and develop our online services
* We will be directing patient enquiries to a designated call handler to keep the appointment line flowing and reduce the call waiting time

How will we communicate the changes?

* Website and Social Media
* Practice Newsletter
* Messaging system with links to online information
* Text messaging to mobiles
* Notices at the practice
* Prescription messages
* Phone messages when patients are first connected or on hold
* Staff informing patients
* Patient engagement events