What do the public think are the biggest challenges facing general practice?

Jake Beech policy fellow

General practice is under immense pressure. Longstanding issues such as high workload and staff shortages have collided with the demands of the pandemic to push practice teams to the limit.¹

The public know there is a problem and are feeling the impact. The latest British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) shows satisfaction with general practice has fallen dramatically since 2019, to the lowest levels since the survey began in 1983.² Tensions have also been high around access to face-to-face GP appointments, driven in part by coverage in the media and interventions from prominent politicians.³

What the public want and how that matches up with what general practice can safely and reasonably provide is a crucial question as attention turns towards the future and securing lasting sustainability of the sector. Our recent polling, done in partnership with Ipsos, has helped to shed further light on current public opinion towards general practice, offering insights to inform the wider debate and future policy.⁴

What do the public think are the biggest challenges facing general practice?

Our polling asked the public what they felt were the biggest challenges facing their local GP practice. It wasn’t hugely surprising to find that top of the public’s list of concerns are waiting times for appointments being too long, it being too hard to book an appointment, and there not being enough doctors.

But perceptions of the challenges are not evenly shared across all demographic groups. For example, people living in the most deprived areas are significantly more likely to identify it being too hard to book an appointment or not being able to get an appointment in a format that suits them as challenges. People aged 65 and over feel not being able to see the same person each time is more of an issue whereas working aged people and those with children have more concerns around getting an appointment at a time that suits them.

Where does general practice fit among wider priorities for the NHS?

It’s important to observe how the public feel about general practice alongside attitudes towards the NHS more broadly and the wider pressures services are under. The public’s top three priorities are addressing the pressure on or workload on NHS staff, increasing the number of staff in the NHS, and improving waiting times for routine services such as diagnostic tests or operations.

In this broader poll, getting easier access to GP appointments and easier access to face-to-face appointments ranked next among the most selected priorities, similar to improving the wellbeing of NHS staff and improving mental health services.

This suggests that while face-to-face appointments and easy access to general practice are important for many, the public understands the impact that underlying issues like workforce and workload are having on the health service, its staff and their own experience.

How important are face-to-face appointments?

Both our survey and the BSA survey were done at a time when access to face-to-face GP appointments was getting significant media attention. But although media narratives influence perceptions, direct experience matters too—79% of people in our survey had used GP services in the past year.

Being able to get face-to-face GP appointments is clearly important to people. But there may be a difference between preferences expressed in the abstract—when asked by pollsters—and people’s preferences when they actually seek care. A variety of factors affect patient decision-making which aren’t always captured in surveys. Separate Health Foundation analysis found that only 10% of patients requesting appointments at a group of surgeries stated a preference for face-to-face appointments, with the majority wanting a telephone call.⁵

What does this mean for the future of general practice?

Our findings will feel especially important for politicians concerned about perceptions of poor access. But the picture is complex and sometimes counterintuitive. The public considers waiting times to be a major challenge for general practice, but data for February 2022 show around 45% of appointments took place on the day of booking.⁶ We need to better understand what is really underpinning dissatisfaction, and how this varies in different places and between different groups. People’s experience of access is shaped by a complex mix of factors, including how systems to access care are designed, people’s own sense of their eligibility for care, and prevalent media narratives around access challenges.⁷

There are no quick fixes to the fundamental mismatch between demand for care and available staff in general practice. This mismatch has been exacerbated by covid-19, but predates the pandemic. Politicians need to be honest with the public about this and manage expectations in the short term. They must also actively seek to address these issues by putting in place the mix of policy and investment needed to support practice staff and their patients over the long
term. Public opinion is clear that the status quo cannot stand.

Competing interests: none declared

Provenance and peer review: not commissioned, not peer reviewed


3 Mahase E. GPs are being blamed for government failures in primary care, say doctors. BMJ 2021;374:n2234. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n2234. pmid: 34518166


