

**Member of the Public – Written Submission – 4<sup>th</sup> March 2025**

Dear xxxxxxxxx,

I am pleased to see you are looking into the lack of General Practice in Northern Ireland.

I sent an email a year ago to Robin Swann's office which was passed onto the Directorate of Primary Care

Strategic Planning and Performance Group (DoH NI) see attached response.

At my surgery you have to ring at 8.30 every morning for an appointment regardless of whether you need urgent appointment or a non urgent one. This time does not suit everyone. We need to go back to an appointment system were you can request non urgent appointments in the future at a time when suits the patient.

Kind regards

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

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**From:** NoReply.Tof.dopc <[noreply.tof.dopc@hscni.net](mailto:noreply.tof.dopc@hscni.net)>

**Sent:** 29 February 2024 16:59

**To:** xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

**Subject:** xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

"This email is covered by the disclaimer found at the end of the message."

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Dear xxxxxxxxxxxxx

Please see attached letter.

Kind regards,

Directorate of Primary Care

Strategic Planning and Performance Group (DoH NI)

12-22 Linenhall Street

Belfast

BT2 8BS

**From:** xxxxxxxxxxxx  
**Sent:** 15 February 2024 12:43  
**To:** DoH Private Office <[Private.Office@health-ni.gov.uk](mailto:Private.Office@health-ni.gov.uk)>  
**Subject:** xxxxxxxx- GP Surgery Appointments

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**From:** xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  
**Sent:** 15 February 2024 12:41  
**To:** [robin.swann@mla.niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:robin.swann@mla.niassembly.gov.uk) <[robin.swann@mla.niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:robin.swann@mla.niassembly.gov.uk)>  
**Subject:** GP Surgery Appointments

Dear Mr Swann,

I live in Larne and want to make you aware of the issues around trying to get an appointment at our local GP surgeries.

██████████ surgeries all request you to ring at 8.30 in the morning and are only giving out appointments on a daily basis instead of scheduling for next day or week etc as per pre-covid.

Can you please highlight this issue as it is impossible to ring every morning and we never seem to get through on the phone.

When are they going to go back to pre-covid appointment system.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind Regards

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Dr Margaret O'Brien  
Head of General Medical Services



Sent by email only to:

**Strategic Planning and Performance Group**  
12-22 Linenhall Street  
Belfast  
BT2 8BS

Date: 29 February 2024

Dear [REDACTED]

**[REDACTED] - GP Surgery Appointments**

Thank you for your email, of 15 February 2024, regarding difficulties accessing the services of GP Practices in the Larne area. Please note that the Minister of Health's Private Office has passed this correspondence to me to respond.

I recognise that being able to access GP practices when we need to do so is important for all of us. I would like to reassure you that GP practices are open and will continue to provide both face-to-face appointments and alternative consultation options for patients as appropriate.

GP practices are under significant pressures at present as they deal with immediate demands and the consequences of wider service pressures. It may be helpful if I set out how the service is working to make best use of available resources for everyone who is seeking to access the care that they need.

GP services have been experiencing sustained, high levels of demand since before the COVID-19 pandemic. Practices have therefore continued to adapt how services are delivered in order to make best use of available resources for everyone who is seeking to access the care that they need. It is important that primary care continues to transform to meet growing patient demand.

As independent contractors, GPs manage the day to day running of their practices, including the use of technology, telephony and management of their appointment system within the constraints of their available workforce. Under the general practice telephone first consultations model, it allows patients to seek timely medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP determines the most appropriate approach to safely addressing the patient's needs using their clinical expertise. Where a face to face appointment is appropriate, that will be arranged. Alternatively, the GP may decide, based on their clinical assessment, that a telephone consultation is appropriate or that the patient should be signposted or directed to other relevant services.

This approach has allowed practices to maintain the majority of GP services and has enabled GPs to appropriately manage, treat and support a greater number of people than would otherwise have been the case. With the level of pressure on the service continuing to rise, the use of telephone consultations are an important part of how GPs can treat and support the large number of patients who need their services.

GPs want anyone who has a health concern to feel reassured that they will be able to get an appointment and see a GP if necessary. If people have symptoms or an unexplained illness, or have any reason to be concerned, they should in the first instance contact their GP who will be able to provide advice. For those patients who are considering attending a local ED a specific standalone telephone triage service, 'Phone First' has been established in each of the five Health and Social Care Trust areas. For the Northern area details can be found on their home webpage:

Phone First Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm (excluding bank holidays)

For illness or injury that requires urgent attention but is not life-threatening – call 0300 123 1 123, Text Relay 18001 0300 123 1 123

This too will help in improving daytime access to clinical advice.

Should you wish to raise a formal complaint regarding services provided by your GP practice, this should be done so with the GP practice itself in the first instance. All practices are required to have a complaints procedure to address any issues raised by patients.

Alternatively, the Complaints Team in the Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) within the Department of Health (DoH) can act as an intermediary between a

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patient and the practice. The SPPG Complaints Team can be contacted for further advice and assistance by e-mail: [complaints.sppg@hscni.net](mailto:complaints.sppg@hscni.net), by telephone 028 9536 3893, by text phone 18001 028 95363893, by calling in person or by writing to the SPPG Complaints Team, 12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.

Independent advice and support on making a complaint about health and social care services is also available from the Patient and Client Council, who offer a free, confidential, patient advocacy service. The Patient and Client Council can be contacted by email: [info.pcc@pcc-ni.net](mailto:info.pcc@pcc-ni.net), by Freephone on 0800 917 0222 or by writing to: Patient and Client Council, 9th floor, BT Riverside Tower, 5 Lanyon Place, Belfast, BT1 3BT, FREEPOST.

If, following a response to any complaint, you remain unhappy, you can bring your complaint to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman. The Ombudsman can be contacted by email: [nipso@nipso.org.uk](mailto:nipso@nipso.org.uk), by Freephone 0800 343424 or by writing to: Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, Progressive House, 33 Wellington Place, Belfast BT1 6HN, Freepost NIPSO.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Margaret O'Brien'.

**Dr Margaret O'Brien**  
**Head of General Medical Services**