

Best Practice Guidance for managing Appointment Slot Issues within Choose and Book

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Description	This document is aimed at commissioners and all providers (Acute Trusts, PCTs, the Independent Sector) with directly bookable services on Choose and Book to inform them about the process they have to follow when patients, referrers or The National Appointments Lines (TAL) are unable to book an appointments on Choose and Book because there are no appointment slots available with their chosen provider.
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For Recipient's Use	

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0 1	August 2008	Final version issued
0 2	November 2008	Amended to include correction to e-mail address
0 3	October 2009	Updated to reflect minor process changes
2.0	November 09	Final updated version issues
3.0	July 2010	Updated to reflect new registration process

1. Introduction

This paper provides guidance on the process staff should follow when patients, referrers or The Appointments Line (TAL) are unable to book an appointment on Choose and Book. The most common reason for this is a lack of appointment slots being made available to Choose and Book by organisations providing directly bookable services. This includes NHS Foundation Trusts, NHS Acute Trusts, Primary Care Trust providers and Independent Sector provider sites. This shortage of appointment slots occurs either because: a) the provider is unable to meet demand b) the provider has reduced their polling range to meet Referral To Treatment timescales without increasing capacity at the same time, and c) a mixture of both a and b.

Guidance on the process to be followed was originally produced in November 2006 (Gateway ref: 7413), but this has been updated to ensure that:

- Patients are not disadvantaged and are still able to be offered an appointment with their chosen provider.
- Providers and commissioners take ownership of the problem and understand the effect that reducing available capacity, by for example limiting slot polling or slots made available to Choose and Book, has on the patient experience.

Providers and commissioners understand and address the poor experience subsequently received by patients.

2. Appointment Slot Issues – the effects

Patients should be able to book an appointment at their chosen provider using the Choose and Book system – at their GP practice, on line via the Internet, or by telephone with TAL (or their local Appointments Line). However, a lack of available slots prevents patients, GPs and TAL from booking appointments and creates additional work for providers and practices that have to undertake the additional necessary steps outlined in this document. There are several other reasons that appointment slots may be unavailable and these are outlined in Appendix 1.

When a patient experiences a mismanaged Appointment Slot Issue, it will leave them with a very poor experience where they are confused and frustrated if they have unsuccessfully tried to book their appointment on several occasions. This undermines the key objective of Choose and Book, which is to provide patients with greater certainty about their appointment.

Appointment Slot Issues also affect referrers and practice staff because they are usually the individuals who then have to manage a confused or angry patient. They may also have the added inconvenience and frustration of having to fax a referral letter that they have already added to Choose and Book as part of the referral process. It is therefore important that greater responsibility and ownership of this problem be accepted by providers to ensure patient appointments are arranged without difficulty and in a timely manner with Choose and Book used as intended

3. Appointment Slot Issues – who is responsible?

Providers, commissioners and referrers can all influence the likelihood of a patient experiencing an Appointment Slot Issue. This section details the responsibilities and best practice steps they can all take to minimise the instances where a patient is involved in the Appointment Slot Issues process supported by TAL.

3.1 Referrers

Wherever possible, referrers should offer the patient a shortlist that includes more than one service or more than one provider. This could include selecting multiple sites at a particular provider. Shortlisted options should be clinically appropriate and agreed as suitable options with the patient as part of their right to Free Choice.

Referrers need to inform patients that:

- When there are no appointment slots available, there is a process in place with TAL to resolve this, which will help them book an appointment with their chosen provider.
- If they try to book online and cannot see any available appointment slots then they should either try again at a later time or contact TAL who will help them to book their appointment.
- Where Appointment Slot Issues do occur, they can consider attending any other provider on their shortlist, if they wish to.

It is important to note that patients should not have to return to or contact the GP practice when they experience an Appointment Slot Issue. However, there are a few exceptions to this, if the:

- Patient has received no contact from their chosen provider within 14 days of telephoning to arrange their appointment – Referrers need to know the correct procedure to report such instances to their PCT / PBC Commissioning Lead.
- Appointment Request is for a 2WW referral – In this scenario, if the patient has telephoned TAL, then they will tell patients to contact their GP practice immediately. The GP practice must then support the patient to book their appointment and inform the PCT.
- Provider has not registered with the national Appointment Slot Issues process – In this instance, the GP should inform the PCT, and the PCT should ask the provider to join the process as soon as possible (see Section 4).

Appointments available to the patient are not convenient for a variety of reasons and there are no alternative providers on their shortlist – The GP should discuss alternative providers with the patient.

3.2 Providers

It is recognised that providers are experiencing significant difficulties in trying to ensure that there is sufficient capacity to meet the demand of patients who have chosen to attend their hospital, and thereby meet the objectives of both the Free Choice and Referral To Treatment timescales. It is evident that a large number of providers are significantly reducing their slot polling range for Choose and Book in the belief that this will help them meet maximum waiting times. However, reducing slot poll lengths without increasing capacity at the same time has only one result i.e. patients cannot book their appointment directly through Choose and Book. This is unacceptable, as these patients will instead have to go through the Appointment Slot Issues process. It also compounds waits by creating a backlog of patients who's Referral To Treatment Time has already started, and creates a significant amount of avoidable administrative work for providers.

The clock start date for waiting time monitoring is incorporated in the Appointment Slot Issues process. The ability of patients to successfully book their first outpatient appointment is the first step along their treatment pathway. The clock start date is recorded as the date the provider receives the electronic notification from TAL that the patient attempted to book an appointment but was unable to do so (DSCN 34/2007) not when the provider contacts the patient with an available appointment.

Providers should remember that:

- They are responsible for ensuring that appointment slots for first outpatient appointments are available through the Choose and Book system to ensure patients and GPs can book into them electronically. It is important that NHS organisations have local systems in place to promote equality by supporting all patients in the booking of their outpatient appointment.
- They are obliged to accept all clinically appropriate referrals made to them and cannot turn patients away because they are not able to treat them within Referral To Treatment timescales. This principle is incorporated in the Operating Framework for 2009/10, the new NHS standard acute contract for 2009/10. (N.B. There are different agreements currently in place for some IS providers. Agreements between PCTs and Independent Sector (IS) providers will initially continue to operate under the contractual arrangements of the Extended Choice Network and the Free Choice Network.)
- The Referral To Treatment clock starts upon receipt of the email from TAL informing them that a patient attempted to book their appointment but was unable to do so.

Support for Providers

A toolkit has been produced by the Elective and Diagnostic Intensive Support Team and the Choose and Book team to help providers understand their demand and proactively manage their capacity effectively. This toolkit will help providers minimise instances of Appointment Slot Issues so that patients can book an appointment at their chosen provider. This toolkit can be accessed by registering on the following web address:

www.directory-of-services.info/asplogin/register.asp

This site will also give access to Choose and Book reports and Appointment Slot Issue reports. In addition to the advice and recommendations contained in the toolkit, other actions some providers are taking include:

- Keeping appointment slot polls at e.g. 11 weeks and then monitoring bookings in the Patient Administration System (PAS). Where they feel that due to the nature of the issue a patient may breach Referral To Treatment timescales, they contact the patient and move their appointment forward as necessary. Note: patients can choose to keep their original appointment time if they wish.
- Being careful to clearly distinguish between appointment slot polls in medical and surgical specialties. For example in dermatology services, they poll appointment slots at 11 weeks because the vast majority of first outpatient attendances will mean first definitive treatment, whereas in ENT services where there is a higher conversion to surgery rate appointment slot polls are left shorter. This approach may also be adopted for services attached to specific Clinic Types with low conversion rates in surgical specialties. Using partial booking for follow up appointments so they can change the number of first outpatient and follow up appointments as necessary. This also frees up appointment slots by allowing the system to be driven by the total demand for services and more capacity to be released to Choose and Book (as first outpatient appointment slots).
- Regularly monitoring changes to PAS clinic templates so all changes are reflected in Choose and Book as soon as they happen.
- Using text messaging and other methods to remind patients about their appointments, reducing 'Did Not Attend' and wasted appointment slots.

3.3 Commissioners

Managing demand for a service is a shared responsibility between commissioners and providers and they need to work together to ensure that where appropriate a patient is treated at their first choice of provider.

- With the NHS Constitution Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) have a legal obligation to ensure that patients can fulfil their entitlement to Free Choice.
- PCTs must put the necessary systems in place to offer and support choice and allow patients to book appointments.
- PCTs must check the availability of appointment slots (see Section 5 for more information on reports) at their local providers to ensure that appointments can be booked directly, and actively manage their contract with a provider where this is not the case.

4. The Appointment Slot Issues Process

4.1 Registration

All providers with directly bookable services need to provide TAL with a dedicated e-mail address for details of patients affected by Appointment Slot Issues. To register an e-mail address please complete the registration form via the following link:

www.chooseandbook.nhs.uk/staff/started/providers/tal/asiregistration.xls

4.2 Requirements

Providers need to create a dedicated NHS email address, for TAL to send the daily report listing unfulfilled Appointment Requests. The e-mail address will contain your organisation name to which you must add: 'TALAppointmentRequests' The name format of the NHS mail address should either be: TALAppointmentRequests.ORGNAME@nhs.net or ORGNAME.TALAppointmentRequests@nhs.net in order to maintain continuity should a member of staff be away or move on to another post. Further instructions are available on the registration form at the link above. 'ORGNAME' will be the name of your organisation.

Providers should also provide a dedicated contact name and telephone number so that TAL can make contact if there are any problems with the email address provided.

Providers need to ensure that their staff fully understand the process outlined in this document and act promptly to minimise delays to patient care.

It is important that providers complete all relevant sections of the registration form with the required information and contact details to minimise any delay in the registration process.

4.3 Process

Once providers send their dedicated NHS email address on the required registration form above, a test message will be sent to confirm the accuracy of the address and ensure that it is being monitored. Providers must acknowledge receipt of this test email by replying from the dedicated email address. A response from any other email account will not be accepted.

Within 15 working days of receiving the request, TAL will email the dedicated email address at the provider formally informing them that they are in the Appointment Slot Issues process.

Note: Providers must complete a new registration form to notify any changes to their details, for example changes to their key contact, telephone numbers, email addresses or more importantly, changes to a Trust's name (such as a move to foundation status) so TAL can maintain accurate

records. Failure to notify any changes will affect TAL's ability to operate the Appointments Slot Issues process effectively and patient care may be delayed. The same registration form can be used to notify amendments to existing details.

4.4 Exclusions

Where Appointment Slot Issues occur, TAL will inform patients that their Appointment Request will be sent to their chosen provider who will contact them directly to arrange their appointment.

Exceptions to this process only occur where:

- The Appointment Request is a 2WW referral. In this case, TAL will tell the patient to contact their GP practice immediately.
- The Appointment Request is a combination of being: not urgent, the cause of the slot issue is technical; and it is the first time the patient has contacted TAL about the referral. In this case, TAL will tell patients to call back after one working day (i.e. if the patient calls on a Monday they are advised to call back on the Wednesday) to try to make the booking again. In the majority of cases, technical issues are resolved within this timescale and an appointment can be booked.

Providers need to contact all patients listed on the unfulfilled Appointment Requests report. If providers receive information for another provider, they should return this information to al@nhsdirect.nhs.uk so that TAL can redirect the information to the correct provider.

4.5 Rules and Timeframes

When is an ASI initiated? An ASI is recorded by TAL only if the patient's chosen provider does not have any appointments showing e.g. if there are 1 or 2 slots available but the patient says they are not convenient, TAL do not initiate an ASI in this scenario but suggest the patient tries again in a few days or seeks additional choice options from their GP. TAL will send providers the details of all unfulfilled Appointment Requests when patients are unable to book their appointment directly through Choose and Book with this provider. Patient Appointment Request details are sent via an Excel spreadsheet in a single email called 'Slot problems for XXX provider' to every provider each evening. This spreadsheet is commonly referred to as the 'TAL report' or the 'No Slot Report'. Unfulfilled Appointment Request details for calls received by TAL between their service hours of 07:00 to 22:00 will be in the provider's in box by 09.00 the next day. **An e-mail is generated every day informing the provider whether they have any appointment slot issues for the previous day.**

Local Appointments Lines (LALs) are able to have access to 'CS Wrap' (TAL management information system) so their unfulfilled Appointment Requests are included in the process outlined. LALs are encouraged to access this system, as this will assist in a consistent patient experience and more accurate national reporting.

Once TAL has sent the provider the unfulfilled Appointment Request report, **it is the provider's responsibility to act on the details and provide each patient with an appointment at a date and time that is convenient to them.** They should retrieve the patient's contact information from Choose and Book (using the BMS role) and make contact with the patient within four working days of receipt of the report, i.e. if the TAL report is received by the provider on a Monday, the patient should have been contacted by the provider by the following Monday. In this context, 'contact' means that the provider has actually spoken with the patient by telephone or the patient has received a letter from the provider, rather than having simply tried to contact the patient.

Providers should try firstly to contact patients by telephone and should make at least three attempts. If the provider is unable to contact the patient by telephone by the end of the second working day following receipt of the Appointment Request, providers should send a letter to the patient by first class post asking the patient to contact them to arrange their appointment.

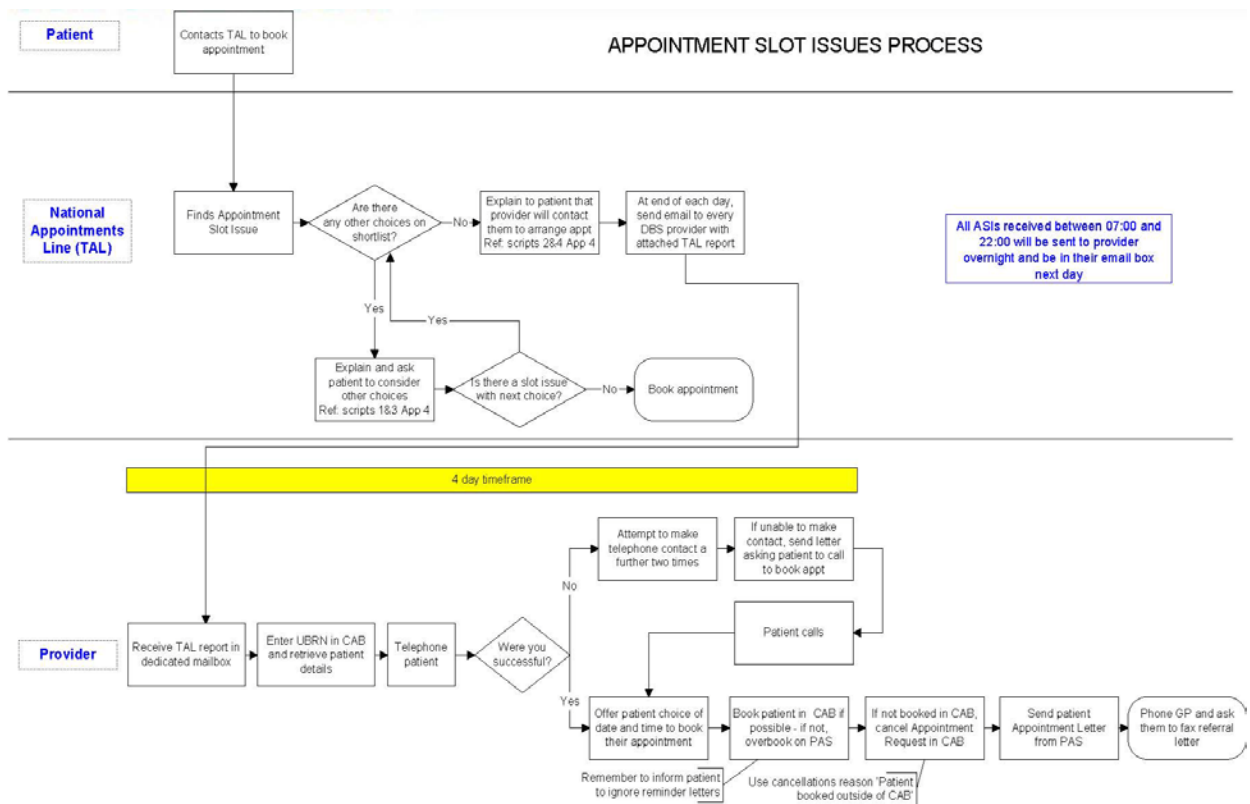
If further directly bookable appointment slots are not available providers will need to book this appointment outside Choose and Book. **In these cases, they should cancel the Appointment Request in the Choose and Book system using the reason 'Patient booked outside Choose and Book' and record the PAS appointment date and time in the comments field.**

If the appointment is booked outside Choose and Book providers will not be able to access the patient's referral letter from Choose and Book because no appointment has been booked in the system. Therefore, providers will need to ring the patient's referring practice to have the referral letter faxed to them.

In order to prevent patients from returning to GP Practices when they have not yet had their appointment booked, it is suggested that providers add the following paragraph to their contact letters:

'This letter is to confirm that we have received your request for an appointment with the [enter name of service] from The Appointments Line. We are sorry that there were no appointments available when you tried to book. Please contact us on the number above so we can arrange your appointment immediately. In the meantime, please ignore any reminder letters from The Appointments Line.'

The diagram below illustrates the process to follow:



5. Management Information

The use of Choose and Book information and data by providers and commissioners is fundamental to managing Appointment Slot Issues locally and monitoring performance. Providers should know that the latest statistics on Appointment Slot Issues for each provider organisation are discussed regularly at the monthly Directors of Performance meetings for Strategic Health Authorities.

The information available, and where it can be obtained, is.

The '**weekly slot issues**' report enables providers and PCTs to look at Appointment Slot Issues by type, by specialty and over time. Importantly it helps to compare the number of Appointment Slot Issues against the number of overall bookings - providing a ratio for the number of appointment slot issues with successful bookings. It is recommended that all providers review this report regularly to understand their current appointment slot issues position, and track their progress over time.

This report is now available with the weekly bookings report by following this link:

www.directory-of-services.info/asplogin/register.asp - and then registering on the site (users will need their organisation's 3-digit ODS (NACS) code).

There are **two enquiries on Choose and Book** which provide real-time information: For those with a **Service Definer** role there is a Slot Availability Enquiry which shows real-time data on unused and used slots by Specialty / Clinic Type and Priority for a specified time period. There is also a Slot Availability Enquiry for those with a **Commissioner** role, which provides the same information for a specified provider.

There are **two monthly reports on Choose and Book**, which are available to those with an **Information Analyst** role, which show Past Slot Utilisation (SPR09) and Future Slot Utilisation (SPR10) at Specialty and Service level. In the Future Slot Utilisation report, available slots, appointments booked via Choose and Book, and unused slots are displayed by priority and week over a thirteen-week period. In the Past Slot Utilisation report, available slots, appointments booked via Choose and Book, and unused slots are displayed by priority and week for the last six weeks.

Appendix 1: Causes of Appointment Slot Issues

The most common reason for the message stating there are 'No available appointments within the chosen service' is that there are insufficient appointment slots being polled to Choose and Book to meet current demand. However, there are other reasons that may result in a problem booking an appointment such as:

1. **Appointment is no longer available:** this will be caused by one of the following:
 - a. The appointment slot may have been directly booked into in the provider's Patient Administration System (PAS) since the overnight polling of slots into Choose and Book.
 - b. The appointment slot may have been taken by another Choose and Book user attempting to book the appointment slot at the same time.
 - c. There may be a technical problem affecting the messaging between the provider's PAS and Choose and Book, which means the appointment slot is being reported by Choose and Book as no longer available when in fact the slot is still available in the PAS. (In this scenario, TAL will attempt to book the patient into three separate appointment slots before assuming that the cause of slot unavailability is a technical problem).
2. **The provider's PAS is not available:** this occurs where there is a technical problem affecting the how the provider's PAS and Choose and Book work together.
3. **Other technical issues:** there may be other technical issues affecting the Choose and Book system nationally.
4. **Unrealistic due by date:** if a referrer enters a due by date against a UBRN, this will limit the number of slots available to the patient. Although this functionality is rarely used, this could result in Appointment Slot Issues.

Appendix 2: Dataset provided in TAL report to providers

Data item	Details / comments
Date of call	
Time of call	
UBRN for Appointment Request	This needs to be recorded such that duplicate UBRNs aren't sent through multiple times
Status of Appointment Request	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routine • Urgent • 2WW
First or second call	Whether it is the first time or second time patient has called TAL in relation to this Appointment Request
Reason for slot unavailability (coded as bulleted list)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No appointment showing on system • No suitable slots • Appointment no longer available • PAS not available • Other technical issue
Provider name	From masterfile provided by DH
Provider site	If the provider has more than one site on the shortlist
Specialty	From list provided by DH
Rebooking	<p>Yes / No</p> <p>Whether slot unavailability has been experienced when patient has attempted to rebook their appointment</p>
Comments by TAL operator	Any further relevant information including any reason why expected process was not followed in terms of whether or not patient was advised their details would be forwarded to the provider (for example, if the patient has advised the TAL operator they wish to contact their GP Practice to request further provider choices)

Appendix 3: Additional useful information

Please follow the links below to access additional information to help manage the ASI process.

- **TAL Scripts** www.chooseandbook.nhs.uk/staff/communications/fact/talscripts.pdf
- **Responsibilities and Operational Requirements for the Correct Use of Choose and Book**
www.chooseandbook.nhs.uk/staff/communications/fact/ror.pdf

