

Access to GP Services

GP Websites – how easy is it to find information?



An observational assessment of information provided on GP websites in West Sussex.

December 2020

Refreshed and published in March 2021

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Context

There are currently 80 GP practices in West Sussex (with the recent merge of Lime Trees and Phoenix Surgeries in Worthing).

Firstly, we would like to acknowledge the dedication of Primary Care workers, who have put themselves at risk to help us all.

Secondly, we appreciate the need for General Practice (GP Services) to adapt and offer more digital support to achieve social distancing and manage demand, and that this had to be done quickly with little lead in time. Recognising that some routine treatments and procedures were paused, and some remain unavailable because of remaining risks and/or demands.

The patient viewpoint of this adaption has been captured through [surveying](#) Sussex residents. Findings show that for many patients the move to phone, video and online access to GP services has been accepted, and for some, it has been beneficial. Having said this, we acknowledge that this engagement would not have enabled the participation of people who are digital excluded or digitally resistant.

To support general practice (and other services), Healthwatch in Sussex is currently working on the key areas that providers should focus on when offering services digitally (phone, online and virtual platforms) to improve peoples' understanding and experiences.

From talking to people who have needed treatment (in October), we found of the hospital patients we spoke to that they seemed to have a persisting belief that **GPs are closed** or **only available for some phone information and advice**. This may well have changed since then with the rollout of the vaccination programme.

From what we heard, much of the misconception stems around it being phone 'advice', rather than a consultation, stems from **patients not being given a phone consultation appointment**. Instead, they were told (in most cases) that someone would call them back in a vague timeframe.

The issue of not being given an appointment time for a call back seems to be a recurring theme, many residents commenting that they have been told they would be called at some point during the day. Many have expressed that they find this difficult to plan around, and certainly, they were unaccustomed to this as previous experience of a in-person consultation was that they would be given an 'appointment time/location' and in many cases, the name of the clinician they would be seeing.

There **remains a duty for general practice to provide face-to-face consultations** and local practices have put in place a variety of different social distancing measures, which include in some cases, the closure of the waiting room facilities.



This has led to people waiting outside and we highlight concerns for patients in our [Baby Its Cold Outside](#) report.

Since the end of the Lockdown One residents have been increasingly sharing information to suggest some are struggling to access GP services in West Sussex. The length of time people reporting waiting to get through to a GP Practice is very mixed and in some cases is extreme. We are aware that a number of Practices are in the process of installing more telephone lines to compensate for the increase in outbound calls.

Accessible information, that helps the public to understand the necessary changes to services is key to managing the COVID-19 response and how services will be offered going forward.

One of the questions we want to answer was - how these changes are being communicated? Starting with Practice websites.

Websites are considered to be a service's *shop window* and are an important communication tool. [Out-of-date web information can lead to poor experience, as shown in the story below.](#)



I'm new patient come to register to GP and staff was very rude and unwelcome, start argue with me with no reason, make me feel very badd, as I didn't press ring button strong enough, and ask where I can put "new register forms" as website said "hand in person" not "leave outside in the box". Would say event in covid-19 situation need more respect and understand. Hope they will make some improvements as really not nice welcome for new patients.

Kind regards new unwelcome patient

<https://www.careopinion.org.uk/807420> - December 2020



Anecdotal insight, and a couple of quick social polls (What's App and Facebook), suggest GP websites are not automatically the go-to for patients to learn about changes. This may be even more so, as some practices have removed online booking. The accept we noted to this was student aged adults who shared that they do use a GP website for information.

Our aim through this work is to support local GP Practices in getting the most from their websites.

To do this we've reviewed current content and through this report are sharing what we believe good practice looks like.

Each practice has been given an individual report and where applicable has been invited to review information that appears out-of-date or would benefit from an information refresh.



Key findings

We have seen some very good information and language that reflects a supportive Practice approach and examples are shared to encourage greater patient/public engagement through this communication tool.

- As perhaps is to be expected given that GP Practices are individual businesses, the content across West Sussex is varied - as is the tone used.

This variation extends to areas where we would have expected to see some standardised narrative, such as information about what happens when the practice is closed, new patient registration and general COVID information.

- All practice detail some COVID information (often in *pop-up boxes*) and there is evidence of adapting quickly to COVID. Systems and processes have been put in place that are not always *customer friendly*.

With some web information being from earlier in the pandemic, for example stating the Practice is only doing phone consultations. This we suggest goes some way to explaining why some people had the perception GP Practices were *closed*, particularly if they are unable to get through on the phone as well.

- There is for most Practices, contradictory information between their webpages for appointments, prescriptions, and new patient registration.
- Some Practice pages state that Improved GP Access Services have been suspended, when in other locations these appear to be continuing.
- The majority of websites did not contain information about what to expect if a patient needed to visit the Practice, including wearing a mask, social distancing and whether you could be accompanied.

We appreciate this information may be given to people when an in-person appointment is being booked, but it would make sense we feel to have this information readily/visibly on the website.

- Similarly, there were very few examples of information to support patients to prepare for a consultation over the phone or online, and yet there is some very useful information available (see Appendix A for an example.)

We have also been working with Young Graduates of the National Citizen Scheme to look at how to help young people be more prepared and confident for a GP consultation and this will be available from Easter 2021.



- The information regarding patient registration needs to be clearer in terms of peoples' rights to register and rights concerning proof of ID, if asked.

NHS England is having a big push on GP registration and is producing cards on a national basis, using the NHS England contact centre for support. These can not only help homeless people but others who may face difficulties such as people living on boats, Gypsies and Travellers - and even people moving accommodation.

We plan to distribute cards to homeless hostels/community organisations in April 2021. It is important that frontline staff recognise and accept this cards. Here is an image of the card.

Register with your GP today **NHS**

Hello, my name is Dr Raj Patel and I am a GP.
It's really important to register with a GP to help you stay healthy, safe and well.
It's easy to register, even if you don't have a fixed address or ID. Our staff give expert care and will make you feel welcome.

NHS

I have the right to register and receive treatment from a GP practice

I do not need a fixed address.
I do not need identification.
Anyone in England can see a GP.

- During our review there were issues with finding read aloud and language translation tools. As of 23 September 2020, all GP websites will need to meet [accessibility standards for public sector organisations](#).
- Given the emerging new roles in GP Services, such as social prescribers, paramedic practitioners and physician associates (to name but a few) we took the opportunity to review how Practices communicate who does what.

Again, we found much variation. Some simply listed staff and did not even detail the gender of all clinicians. Having access to someone of the same gender can be very important to some patients or when speaking to a clinician about particular health issues.

Recommendations



RECOMMENDATION

1. An NHS phrase recently coined and circulating when speaking of change is ‘one-way valve’ - meaning there is a desire to keep advances in digital solutions brought about through the pandemic. With this in mind, Practices should review their marketing and information to ensure it reflects how the business of providing GP Services is continuing.

We would invite Practices to consider collaborating with their Patient Participation Group - asking them to regularly review the website and possible undertaking recommendation 2.

We would say the same for updating the Patient Leaflets.



RECOMMENDATION

2. As the deadline for compliant public sector websites has past, it is important to make sure that all Practice sites are accessible.

However, given the pressure on Practices with existing/delayed treatment demand and now a mass vaccination programme, practices may find this [link](#) useful as it provides a basic accessibility check if you can't do a detailed one.



RECOMMENDATION

3. Information about the environment in the surgery and safety measures should be easily available to reassure and prepare people for their in-person appointments.

We would suggest Practices consider alternative ways of presenting information such as a video tour of waiting area, precautions in treatment rooms, PPE and hand sanitisers. This may be something that the vaccine volunteers can support with after the main delivery has been completed?



RECOMMENDATION

4. West Sussex Clinical Commissioning Group should look at supporting Practices to implement agreed core narrative for the following areas:
 - Out of Hours
 - New Patient Registration
 - West Sussex COVID information.



RECOMMENDATION

5. Some websites were easier to navigate, had a patient-focused tone of voice and shared more useful information. Sharing of best practice within the West Sussex Clinical Commissioning Group and Primary Care Networks should be undertaken and resourcing of web-updating considered.





RECOMMENDATION

6. \Sharing a full range of options for people to provide feedback and complaints and labelling them appropriately.



RECOMMENDATION

7. Given the focus on health inequalities, it is important that websites have appropriate accessibility and information, but also that the photos/images used do not add an unwanted bias. Practices should review the use of photos and images across the website and seek to ensure there is a good mix of ages, ethnicity, and disabilities.



RECOMMENDATION

8. Sometimes it was not clear how people could share their experiences and it is important that individuals should be able to make an informed choice about which route is best for them.

We appreciate that most websites have information about the [Healthwatch West Sussex](#) Independent Health Complaints Advocacy Service (IHCAS), but there were still a few that did not have this in their policy/procedure literature or under complaints.

Please also note that the Healthwatch West Sussex address has changed to [PO Box 1360, Crawley, West Sussex RH10 0QH](#).



RECOMMENDATION

9. Practices consider the benefit of providing more information about the people working in the surgeries, so patients can familiarise themselves ahead of seeing the clinician.



Detailed findings



I find myself saying the same thing over and over on the surveys I am doing! I think each surgery should have a COVID page where a patients could find everything to do with this - masks, hand sanitiser, what to do if you have to visit the surgery, are the toilets open.

It is difficult when information is all over the place to piece it together and all the other information, good as it is, is clouding the COVID situation.

Reviewer's comments on the review



We appreciate that it has been extremely difficult to keep up-to-date on the latest COVID guidance. Healthwatch has taken a line to link to Government guidance, but then to put relevant topic information on our website to help local people with the key information areas that we can report on.

Several Practices have COVID pages or rooms, and there is some useful links for support within these. A lot have information on the Home page, but this is easy to miss.

Given that COVID has put a spotlight on health inequalities for those of black and Asian origin and people with learning disabilities, it is vital Practices recognise the need to have representative images and content. In many cases we found websites to be one-dimensional, although there were some that had some useful easy read information.

Given inconsistencies in information exist, we are currently not confident to signpost people to GP websites as a matter of course. However, we are keen to be able to do this, particularly given the volume of enquiries that the COVID vaccination programme generates.

Does the Practice have accessible contact information?

All 80 practices had a website. Most were based on a small number of templates. This should encourage consistency between surgeries, but we did note there were different web-providers used within Primary Care Networks.

The website all provided basic contact information including address, phone number(s), and opening hours. Some contact information was difficult to find or not under an obvious area.

Emails were not always available and not often shown in the contact details. Given the need to avoid people visiting the surgeries, it is important to offer email access and that this is clear, in the contact information.



We have on several occasions received communication for people who believed they were emailing the practice (as our email is often the only one on the website). In one recent case, they had spoken to a clinician and been asked to email photos into the surgery but had not been given an email address and found ours instead.

How good is the information relating to how patients access services?

The need for Practices to make available information about how patients can access service was stated through an [NHS England and Improvement Letter](#) to GPs and Clinical Commissioning Group in September 2020:

..it remains critical that information for patients about how they can access services is clear, encourages patients to consult where necessary, and that face to face care always remains available when clinically appropriate, provided in line with these requirements.

With that in mind, we have created the attached communications toolkit. We would be grateful if all practices could review their communications to patients across the board, in line with these recommendations, and you may need to ensure that reception and other staff are aware of the key messages.

It is important that no practice suggests in their communication that the practice is closed or that the practice is not offering the option of face to face appointments.

A **Toolkit** has been produced to support Practices to communicate access to their services.

There is some very useful information on a number of Practice website and here is a few.



Crawley Downs Medical Group, which is now operated by Modality Partnership had a COVID page with a **video** updating people on how COVID has changed the way they work at the surgery and giving reassurance to patients.

Arundel Surgery had a highly visible notice on its Home [page](#).



Main surgery number 01903 882191
Emergency number 01903 882517

[About](#) | [Practice information](#) | [Prescriptions](#) | [What we offer](#) | [Immunisation & travel](#) | [Health information & advice](#) | [ASCA](#) | [News](#) | [Contact](#)
[Privacy Notices](#) | [Policies and procedures and complaints](#) | [Self Help Links](#)



Contact

Appointments

Patient Notice

In an attempt to reduce the spread of COVID-19 we are trying to limit face to face contact between staff and patients.

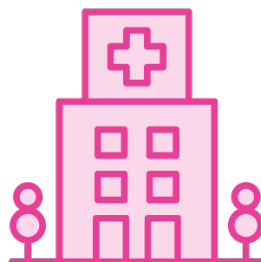
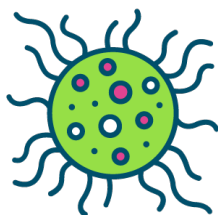
Appointments – We would ask that you do NOT come into the surgery unless you have a pre-arranged appointment. If you wish to make an appointment we would ask that you call to arrange this on 01903 882191 rather than come in to make one. All appointments will be by telephone where possible and some routine services have been suspended until further notice.

Prescriptions -Ideally, this is the time for everyone to move to the electronic prescribing service which offers safer, faster prescribing. However, if you are still using the old-fashioned paper scripts please post any requests in the letter box outside. You may enter to pick up old paper scripts from reception but we would ask you to join the queue and wait to be called to the desk.

Surgery
hours

Alternatives to
seeing a GP

We liked: the videos the [Strand Medical](#) and [Broadwater Medical Centre](#) produced for their flu clinics. They are informative and reassuring, and we are confident would have helped people to be prepared for their visit to get their flu vaccination.



Pop-up COVID information

Many Practices have *pop-up* COVID information that appears when people visit the website for the first time. Normally this needs to be closed to access any other information. In some cases, once this has been closed there is no other way of accessing the information.

Other sites have this appearing whenever you move to another page, which our reviewers found very frustrating. An alternative, as used by [Bognor Medical Practice](#) (and other practices) is to have the pop-up only reappear when the visitor goes back to the Home page.

Closed or open?

Reviewers could see Practices add information to the Home page (often this just gets added to the top - irrespective of importance of other information below). However, it does not appear that such information is updated on a corresponding web-page, so the whole site reflects the same information. This is particularly the case with the Appointments and Repeat Prescriptions pages.

This created inconsistent information and from what people have told us about how they use GP websites, is likely to mean that the change is missed.

Home page information may state people should only come to the surgery by appointment, but as the story on page 2 shows, people may not read the Home page fully and just default to the information page they need.

We found some information was added at the beginning of Lockdown One and had not been updated since. We are concerned that this would then not reflect well on a Practice being open and able to see people in-person if clinically needed.

Does the website have staff profiles?

Some surgeries only provide very basic information, such as, name and qualifications of their GPs, and only role title for others. Some surgeries had photographs and a biography. There was a disparity about which staff were profiled, some practices just focused on GPs while others include all clinician and practice staff.

We liked: [Bridge Medical Centre](#) and [Avisford Medical Group's](#) way of showing different members of staff and the roles they perform.

Sharing more about staff helps to build a rapport with patients and creates a more friendly tone of voice.

Including gender in the description (not just relying on first names indicators) is important.



New Patient Registration

The New Patient Registration page was often one that our reviewers found did not reflect the need to avoid people coming to the surgery.

Some Practices had made it clear that they were accepting registration forms by email and had suspended the need for people to provide ID. It would be interesting to understand from these practices if this had created any issues?

Most practice state they require ID and proof of address.

Some practices included a statement that they do not discriminate on the grounds of any protected characteristic. Whereas another practice suggested the GPs could simply refuse to register someone without giving any information on what grounds.

Often practices include a patient leaflet on the registration web-page, but most seemed out of date and did not reflect changes that have taken place.

We liked: The tone of voice of [Lindfield Medical Centre](#) and that the Strand Surgery included the [My-Health-Care-Passport-leaflet](#) and carers support information.

Interestingly, the Central Regis (Bognor) Primary Care Network has added:

During the Covid-19 emergency your GP practice, like the rest of the NHS, is prioritising patient care. To minimise administrative work, all GP practices locally are requesting that you (and other members of your family) do not seek to re-register with another GP practice at this time. You should only ask to register with a new GP practice if:

1. You, and your family, have physically moved to a new house and are now living in a new GP practices area
2. You have a new-born baby, or a newly adopted baby or child
3. You are a first degree relative of a currently registered patient who has returned to live with their family
4. You do not currently have a GP, and need to register with one

If you have moved to a new house, but remain within your current GPs practice area, please do not re-register with a new GP practice at the present time, even if you intend to do so in the future.

Please do not seek to register with a new GP practice unless one of these four reasons apply to you.

West Sussex Clinical Commissioning Group could support with consistency of information.

You can find more information on the *My Rights to Healthcare Cards*, shown on page 4, by clicking [here](#).



Is there information on how to access medical assistance when the practice is closed (Out of Hours)?

There was an incredible amount of variation in the information found and this has been shared with West Sussex Clinical Commissioning Group for consideration.

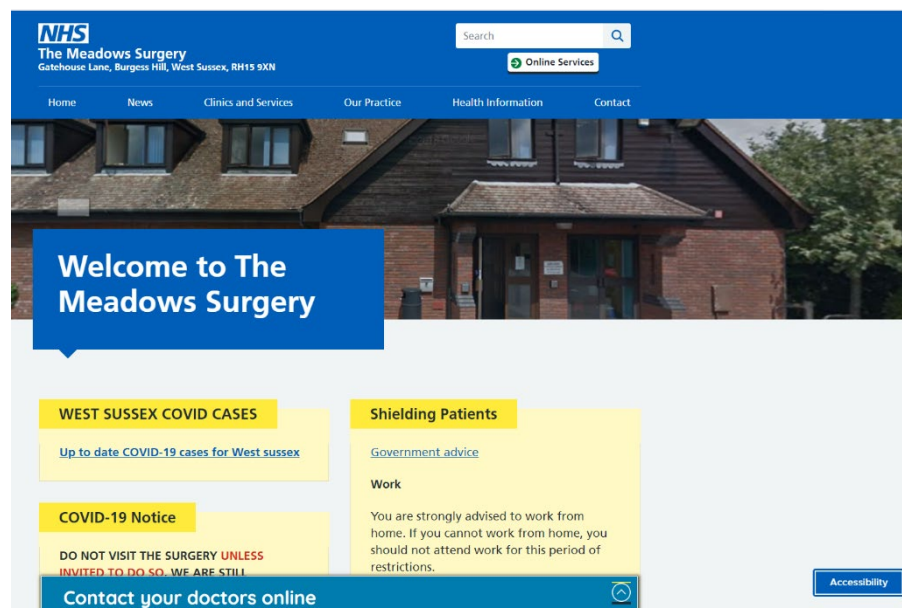
Reviewers found that in some locations the surgery websites were suggesting that the [extended evening and weekend](#) access to GP services had been suspended. Whereas on other practice websites this read as continuing. We are concerned this is creating a postcode lottery and pushes up demand to 111 and hospitals.

How accessible are GP websites?

Some of our reviewers could not find an option to translate the website or information into another language. Sometimes this option was found in different pages, which seems counter-productive, e.g. people would not understand what pages to click on to find the translation option.

Similarly, some reviewers could not find the tool to open up accessibility links or these were very limited on the website - such as only able to increase the font size.

We particularly [liked](#) the layout and care taken by [The Meadows Surgery, Burgess Hill](#), which not only had a clear [Accessibility](#) link, but had looked at using visually appropriate colour to help visitors to the site.



Giving feedback or making a complaint

Sometimes it was hard to find how people could give feedback.

It is important practices consider how people can offer anonymous feedback, otherwise they will take to use public feedback options before the service has the chance to address concerns.



The majority of website provided information on raising a complaint, with the exception of only a few (which may have the information but both reviewers had not been able to find it.)

The methods for raising a concern or making a complaint were different, with some practices offering online methods and others advising the patient to visit the surgery.

It is important practices consider offering a range of ways people can provide feedback or raise a complaint.

Overall, the quality and breadth of information provided was variable. Some surgeries seemed more transparent and welcoming of feedback both positive or negative, than others. This is a key area where the Practice's *tone of voice* becomes so important.

Does the website display the Practice Care Quality Commission rating?

The majority of websites had clear information and links to reports by the Care Quality Commission (CQC.)

This is a registration requirement of registration and the CQC, and where we had not been able to find this information, we have alerted the Practice and West Sussex Clinical Commissioning Group.

Does the website tell visitors about how to get involved and how to join the Patient Participation Group (PPG)?

As with so much of this review, the findings were mixed. In some case, people needed to have a knowledge of what the group was called to know it was the PPG or where to find this information.

PPG can be a real communication asset to a Practice, and we would suggest members become involved in auditing the website content to support the staff in keeping pages up-to-date and challenge any language that is not *patient-friendly*.

Does the website display patient survey results?

We appreciate there is not a requirement to display feedback/patient survey results, but it would be useful information for the public.

Interestingly, some of the websites have links to their report from the national annual survey results. Others provided links to practice based surveys.

In some case our reviewers were unable to find any feedback or surveys, or some sites appeared to have *very* historical reports.



What we did

Every website was reviewed by two people (staff x 2, or a volunteer and a member of staff).

The websites were reviewed in the last 10 days of November 2020 and re-reviewed in early December. The information we found was a snapshot of the information held on the sites in the given time period, and there was much information we did not look at.

Staff members have since relooked at the information against the individual practice reports to refresh the observations and comments we have made.

The questions we asked were designed to answer - [How well has changes in the access to GP services been communicated?](#)

The questions were also designed to get an overview on how well the patient involvement and experience was communicated.



Appendix A

VIDEO CONSULTATIONS IN PRIMARY CARE 4: A guide for patients on consulting by video

Decide if video is right for you

- If you just need general information and self-care tips, use a website (e.g. put 'NHS coronavirus advice' into Google)
- You don't need a video consultation if a phone call will do
- Video consultations provide more visual information and can be more reassuring if you're anxious
- Your doctor or nurse may be self-isolating and working by video
- Check your GP practice's website to see what is on offer

Get set up technically

- A good internet connection
- A quiet place where you won't be disturbed
- A computer, tablet or smartphone with a built-in camera and microphone
- Test your audio and video connection and adjust the settings so you can see and hear well (or get someone to do this for you)
- Check your practice website for what else you need to do (different video platforms have slightly different set-up steps)

Booking and connecting

- Make a video appointment by following instructions from your GP practice (on the practice website or answering machine)
- Just before your appointment time, click the connection
- Say hello or wave when you see the doctor or nurse (you may both have to fiddle a bit to get the sound and picture working well)
- Make sure the doctor or nurse knows your phone number so they can call you back if the connection fails

Having your consultation

- Look at the screen (there's no need to look directly at the camera)
- If all goes well, the call will feel like a face to face appointment
- Use the screen camera to show things (e.g. a rash)
- If you get cut off and can't reconnect, wait for a phone call
- Write down any advice or instructions, and make sure you understand the next steps (e.g. where to leave a specimen)
- When you've both said goodbye, disconnect



Talk to us

If you have questions about the content of this report, please either call 0300 012 0122 or email katrina.broadhill@healthwatchwestsussex.co.uk

How this insight will be used?

We recognise that all health and care services are under pressure at this time and have had to adapt their ways of working. We shared a draft of this report with the local NHS in December 2020. On request, we delayed sending the individual practice report until late March 2021. We see this as a continuation of discussions around changes in how GP services are accessed. We will use this insight and the suggestions presented to challenge for a better way of communicating with patients.

For help, advice, and information or to share your experience.

We are the independent champion for people who use health and social care services. We're here to find out what matters to people and help make sure their views shape the support they need.

We also help people find the information they need about health, care and community and voluntary health and care support services in West Sussex.



Here to help you on the next step of your health and social care journey

We have the power to make sure that the government and those in charge of services hear people's voices. As well as seeking the public's views ourselves, we also encourage services to involve people in decisions that affect them.



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