



Consulting Room 4

Collington Surgery
October 2026

healthwatch
East Sussex

Contents

Context and Aims	3
Methodology	4
Practice details	5
Pebsham audit	7
Collington audit	9
Ninfield audit	11
Sea Road audit	13
Conversations with staff and PPG	15
What patients told us	16
Mystery shopping	17
Conclusions	21
Recommendations	22
Response from Vita Healthcare	24

Healthwatch East Sussex

Healthwatch East Sussex (HWES) are the local independent watchdog for health and social care services. We gather feedback from residents, good, bad and mixed, and make recommendations to change services for the better.

If you have used a health or care service, please tell us about your experience by leaving a review on our Feedback Centre: <https://healthwatcheastssussex.co.uk/services/>

If you need support in accessing health and care services, please contact our Information and Signposting service by:

Visiting: <https://healthwatcheastssussex.co.uk>

Emailing: enquiries@healthwatcheastssussex.co.uk

Calling: 0333 101 4007

Context and aims

Background

General Practice is a crucial first point of contact for patients, but often faces competing priorities, constrained resources, and changing requirements e.g. new GP contract, Modern General Practice etc.

Given its importance as people's most common touch point with health and care services, unsurprisingly, GPs are the most common focus of feedback we receive.

We regularly hear a range of feedback including;

- Challenges using digital systems, rather than face-to-face/phone
- Concerns over 'triage' processes
- Poor communication with patients and other services
- Lack of clarity on complaint processes and patient rights

This year, as part of our annual work plan, HWES set out to work with GP practices across East Sussex to support and enable practice staff and Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) to hear what is working well and what may benefit from change.

HWES would like to thank Vita Healthcare and Collington practice for taking part in this project, NHS Surrey and Sussex for their support, and our Healthwatch volunteers who helped shape and carry out the activities.

Aims and objectives

Our aim was to work with GP practices to explore their accessibility, how they engage with patients, and how PPGs/staff may be supported to deliver change.

Our objectives were to:

1. Identify areas of good practice and areas for improvement in terms of patient experience
2. Identify areas of good practice and areas for improvement in terms of the physical practice sites
3. To engage with PPG's and Practice Managers to support them to embed patient engagement into their routine activities
4. To support improved experiences of patients when using GP practices and their services

Methodology

In May 2026, HWES contacted Collington Surgery about involvement with the project. Following an initial project overview meeting with practice staff an initial visit to the main practice site at Pebsham took place on the 23rd of June.

The visit was undertaken by two HWES volunteers and two staff members. They were joined on the day by the practice managers and chair of the Patient Participation Group, who provided access to the site and answered questions.



During the visit, we:

- Assessed the internal and external physical space of the surgery
- Looked at what signage and information was available to patients within the surgery
- Observed the patient experience within the reception area of the practice
- Spoke with the practice managers and PPG representative
- Talked with patients that were present on the day about their experiences

Subsequent visits were also carried out at the practices three other branch sites (Collington, Sea Road and Ninfield) on the 9th July to speak with patients and carry out audits of their internal and physical environments.

As well as the visits, HWES staff and volunteers conducted 'mystery shop' reviews of the surgeries website and phone messages to understand the patient experience of engaging with the practice through these methods.

The mystery shopping used a mix of prescribed questions and scenarios to review the websites and phone messages of the practice with the focus of exploring each for:

- Clarity of information – is it in clear, plain English, with few acronyms?
- Quality of information – is the information provided accurate and up-to-date?
- Usefulness of information – would this deliver the appropriate information to people?
Are patients able to find what they need?

This report presents findings for Collington practice as whole but includes specific observations about each individual practice site.

Please note, this report relates to findings observed during the date and time of the visits, desk research and mystery shops. Our report is not a representative portrayal of the experiences of all patients and staff, only an account of what was observed and contributed at the time. We acknowledge the limitations of our findings due to the subjective nature of the adopted methodology.

Practice details



Collington Surgery is a GP practice located in East Sussex delivering services across four branch locations:

- [Collington Surgery](#) – Terminus Road, Bexhill
- [Pebsham Surgery](#) – Seabourne Road, Bexhill
- [Sea Road Surgery](#) – Sea Road, Bexhill
- [Ninfield Surgery](#) – High Street, Ninfield

At the time of our activity Vita Healthcare had written to the ICB to propose the closure of the Sea Road site.

As of April 2026, the practice list size was 16,702 patients.

The practice is part of [Vita Healthcare](#), a Sussex-based NHS GP Partnership and leadership team. Vita Healthcare currently provide NHS Primary Care services at several local GP practices in East Sussex.



Care Quality Commission (CQC)

The practices [last CQC inspection](#) was undertaken in March 2025, and they received an overall rating of **'Good'**.

The inspection also rated different areas of the practice as follows:

- **Safe** – Good
- **Effective** – Good
- **Caring** – Good
- **Responsive** – Good
- **Well-led** – Good

What we have heard

We regularly hear from patients and the public across East Sussex via public events, surveys, submissions on our Feedback Centre and Information & Signposting enquiries about their experiences at local health and care services.

Before this activity started, we collated information we had heard about Collington surgery recently. We had heard mixed feedback from people using the service including:

- Frustrations from patients who felt that they were only able to book appointments using the online booking system.
- Concerns around the proposal to close the Sea Road site and that this may leave some patients having to travel further to access services.
- Long waits for follow up appointments with little communication from the service and people feeling like they are having to chase to keep on top of things.

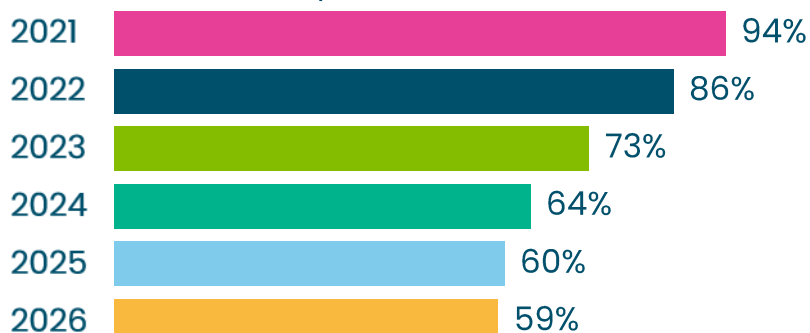
GP Patient Survey

The [GP Patient Survey](#) is an independent survey run by Ipsos on behalf of NHS England. The survey is sent out to over two million people registered with GP practices in England.

The results show how people feel about their GP practice.

The 2026 results for the practice identified:

Overall percentage of patients rating their experience as 'Good'



Higher than the national average:

22% of respondents were **offered a choice of location** when they last tried to make a general practice appointment (16%)

93% of respondents rated the health professional(s) as Good at **listening to the patient** (87%)

93% of respondents rated the health professional(s) as Good at **treating the patient with care and concern** (86%)

95% of respondents rated their health professional(s) were **involved as much as they wanted to be in decisions** about their care and treatment during their last GP appointment (92%)

Equal to the national average:

90% of respondents indicated their **needs as a patient were met** (90%)

Lower than the national average:

59% of respondents rated their **overall experience of the practice** as Good (77%)

52% of respondents rated their **experience of contacting the practice** as Good (73%)

Contact by phone – 26% Good vs 57% nationally
Contact by website – 37% Good vs 58% nationally
Contact by NHS App – 52% Good vs 54% nationally

84% of respondents rated the **helpfulness of the practice reception and administrative team** as Helpful (85%)

83% of respondents knew what the **next step would be after contacting the practice** (84%)

32% of respondents **usually get to see or speak to their preferred healthcare professional** when they would like to (42%)

32% of respondents were **offered a choice of time or day** when they last tried to make an appointment (57%)

Pebsham

During our visits to the four practice sites, our team began by carrying out 'audits' of the external and internal environment to understand the experience from a patient's perspective.

From our exploration of the external area at Pebsham we found:

- The Pebsham branch is located in a residential area, in the east of Bexhill. Due to the location public transport routes are limited, and there is just one bus stop with routes into central Bexhill and Hastings within a 5-minute walk.



- There is a dedicated car park with 14 spaces, one of which is a disabled space and three are reserved for GPs/staff. During our visit this was observed to get very busy, causing problems, as there is minimal space on the residential roads outside the practice for parking.
- There is no main signage for the practice building or the car park, which could make it difficult to find if you didn't know where you were going. Although the main entrance is easy to find as there is just one large automatic door to get in.

- Other signage is provided once at the entrance, this includes an A4 poster on the door detailing opening times, and a large acrylic sign listing practice staff featuring a QR code taking you to the Vita Healthcare website.
- The entrance did include pillars and a lip on the front door which could be difficult to navigate for wheelchair users. The first automatic door leads directly to a manual door. There is a bell adjacent to outer door for anyone needing to call for assistance, however, this was not in operation during our visit.



- On the day of our visit, there was a blocked drain outside the front causing a buildup of mud outside the entrance.

Once in the building we observed:

- An electronic sign-in screen is well sited as you enter the practice. The screen is not observable from either the waiting area seats or the administration desk, and there is minimal space for people to stand behind someone using it, supporting patient confidentiality.

- We observed a sign on reception desk indicating that people who wish to have a confidential conversation can make this known to reception staff who will arrange it. However, the sign was located between the e-sign in, and the receptionist's desk and not directly visible from either.
- During our visit a radio was playing in the waiting area, however, it did not cover the sound of conversations between practice staff and patients at the reception desk.
- The notice boards located around the practice were full of information, which was very diverse in nature. This was not organised into themes, with headers or titles. We also observed some out-of-date information relating to vaccinations and electric blanket testing.



- We observed a 'Suggestion box' located next to entrance/exit, but no additional signage or information was provided adjacent to it, nor did we observe any paper, forms and pens with which to complete a suggestion or a digital alternative provided.



- The waiting area had a mix of chairs with and without arms, but none of varying height or size.
- The layout of the waiting room was generally, light, clear and obstacle free enabling people to navigate their way around. There was also space available for wheelchairs and push chairs to wait.

- Signage for moving around the practice was limited from the waiting room. There was no signage observed in the waiting area indicating the toilets were adjacent to the treatment rooms or that patients can access them. Once you are through to the treatment room corridors, the toilets and treatment rooms are more clearly signed. It was also positive to see that for patients needing to go upstairs the practice made use of a distinct coloured bar in the centre of the wall which could be followed.

Interactions between staff and patients:

- Positive interactions were observed between patients and the reception team as well as the practice staff who came to collect patients for appointments. All staff were observed to be very welcoming, friendly and engaging for patients, and able to deal with enquiries.

Collington

From our exploration of the external area at Collington we found:

- The Collington surgery branch is located in the west of Bexhill. It is conveniently located for access by public transport with a bus stop directly opposite and Collington Railway station less than a 10-minute walk away.
- On initial observation the practice appeared to have parking for 7 cars out the front with two allocated for staff. However, this was contradicted by a sign in window saying parking was for staff only. During our visit we observed patients parking here and it also being used as a drop off space for taxis, resulting in it getting very busy at times. There is also limited on road parking within 100 meters of the site.
- A small 'Collington Surgery' sign was present, but not very visible from the road. The building is also of very similar design and materials to adjacent properties making it challenging to identify as a GP practice.



- Front access to the site is clear with one main entrance. There was an entrance bell, but it was not clear if this is operating, and as the entrance is out of sight of the reception desk, it is not clear how people may request support if needed.
- As with Pebsham the practice does have a acrylic sign out front listing practice staff.

- We observed lots of signs in external windows, including for opening times, however, these were partially blocked as the automatic door remained open. There was also information signposting to other relevant services and details on display about the proposed closure of one of the practices other sites (Sea Road).
- The entrance to the building is via a large automatic door and no obstructions were observed.



Once in the building we observed:

- Within the entrance there was a flyer display, with a large range of leaflets and posters with self-help and other information available. The practice's latest CQC rating information was also displayed in this area.

Collington

- Inside the main entrance there was a manual internal door that would require the other side to be unlocked for a wheelchair to enter. It was unclear how a patient could request help from the reception desk, although the doorway is in line of sight from it.
- The layout of the waiting room away from the reception desk helps to some extent with patient privacy as it provides a separates space for checking in both at the desk and on the digital screen. There was also a sign at reception indicating that people who wish to have a confidential conversation can make this known to reception staff who will arrange it.
- A digital sign-in screen is located away from the reception desk and waiting area, although still in the entrance corridor so details may be viewable from other people waiting.
- Toilet and treatment rooms are visible from the reception area corridor but there is no obvious signage to direct people, and at least one patient asked where the toilets were located during our visit. Once at the toilets the signs on the door make good use of images and text with large, bold font and high contrasting colours.
- Along the corridor to the waiting room there was PCN headed notice board with more general information and limited information signposting to services in the area.
- Once in the waiting room all of the seating was a single uniform height, and no chairs with arm rests were observed. There also did not appear to be any dedicated space for wheelchairs or push chairs.
- No background music was observed during our visits, but a TV was on in the waiting room, which was visible from all seats.



- There was a small comments and feedback box present in the waiting rooms, although there were no pens or papers provided for anyone to leave a comment and no digital method (e.g. QR code) was provided as an alternative.

Interactions between staff and patients:

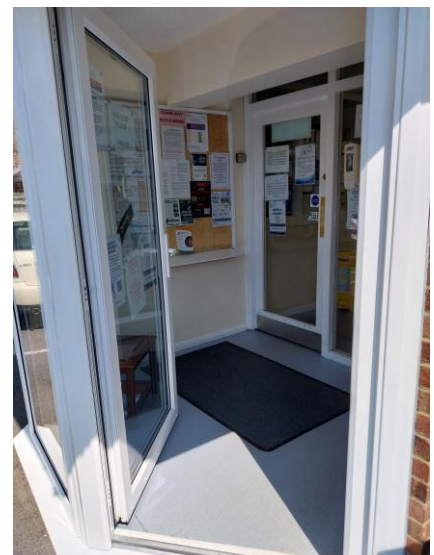
- During our visit staff were observed to be helpful and responsive to patients
- During our visit there was only one receptionist at the desk, and it did get busy at times, as multiple patients arrived with requested for help completing tasks such as; a blood pressure check with the machine in reception, support completing a form, and help understanding the triage process for appointments.

From our exploration of the external area at Ninfield we found:

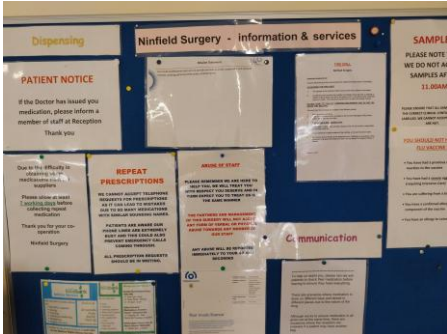
- The Ninfield branch is located in the Wealden district of East Sussex, north of Bexhill. Due to the location the practice is limited in terms of public transport access. There is one bus stop immediately opposite with services running to Hailsham and Eastbourne.
- There is a small car park at the front of the practice with 8 spaces (2 marked for doctors only), and 1 disabled parking space. During our visit there were bins taking up some of the disabled parking space. There is also no adjacent on-street parking.
- There is a large clear sign on the building exterior, but this could be hard to see from the road, especially if a car is in the disabled space as this blocks the view.
- As observed at Pebsham and Collington the Ninfield brand had the same acrylic staff signage out front. Additional external signage included information on opening hours and posters outlining changes to booking appointments.
- There is a clear single entrance to the branch practice. There were two manual doors required for entry, both of which were narrow. An external buzzer was present but there was no accompanying signage, and no clear way of seeking support once inside the first door, which is only partially visible from the reception area.

Once in the building we observed:

- Within the entrance way there was a community notice board providing useful information regarding other local services. The latest CQC rating was also on display in this area.
- Due to the size of the practice site, both the reception and waiting areas were smaller than observed at the other branches. A short wall did separate the two spaces, but it was still possible for conversations at the reception desk to be overheard in the waiting room. There was a Radio present, but this was not on during our visit and a music license form on the wall.
- There was an electronic sign-in screen which was separated from the reception desk but this was visible from most areas of the waiting room.



- Within the waiting area we observed both fixed seating and chairs, both were low and no seating with armrest or varying sizes and heights were present.



- There were a number of noticeboards throughout the waiting area that use of headers/titles making it easier to find specifics. There was no visible information on CQC or the PPG visible in the waiting area or on notice boards inside.

- We were unable to identify any visible means for patients to offer feedback to the practice as no feedback box or mechanisms we observed other than a small feedback box on the reception desk regarding the proposal to close one of the practices branch sites.
- There was limited signage for navigating around the practice, although during our visit we observed that staff came and collected patients from the waiting area leading patients to treatment rooms.
- A single toilet was accessible directly from waiting area, although signage on the door was limited to text only. During our visit, access to the toilet was also partially blocked by empty water fountain bottles.

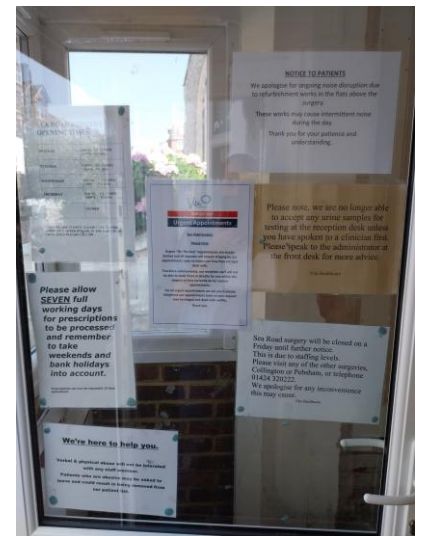
Interactions between staff and patients:

- During our visit we observed positive interactions between patients and the reception team as well as the practice staff who came to collect patients for the appointments.
- All staff were welcoming, friendly and engaging for patients. With one seeming to know many patients by name, patients seemed to really appreciate the level of service from the reception team.

From our exploration of the external area at Sea Road we found:



- The Sea Road branch practice is located in Bexhill Town Centre. Due to its location, there is no dedicated car parking. There is limited free parking on the road outside the practice, however, this is limited to two hours. The town centre location does mean this can get busy.
- The surgery's location positions it well for public transport access. Bexhill train station is less than five minutes' walk away and is well served by train lines and bus routes with bus stops close by.
- The building looks very similar to adjacent properties, so it was not immediately distinct as a GP practice. There is a small sign out front, but this may be better located nearer the road, rather than on the building.
- A range of other signage is visible from the outside of the practice, including a small poster listing staff and a small sign for opening hours. It is worth noting that both these signs differ in design and quality from those observed at the three other practice branches.
- There is a single clear entrance, through two doors. Once inside the first door there was a buzzer for entry, which included both high and low buttons for access, although the door was open during our visit so it was unclear what the buzzer would be used for.



Once in the building we observed:

- The route from the entrance to the reception desk was clear and obvious, with a large reception sign visible, directing people to the desk. The reception desk included a lowered section to provide access for a wheelchair, however, this was not accessible at the time, as this it was obscured with a sign saying to use the other side.
- During our visit we did observe a radio playing in the waiting area, however this did not cover conversations held at the reception desk.



- As with the other practices, a small suggestion box was present in waiting area, but no accompanying information or resources (forms, pens and paper) was provided for patients to use. This was also separate from a notice located elsewhere in the waiting area about giving feedback or making complaints.
- A range of display boards were located in the waiting area. Some had headers/titles which were useful in explaining content. No information about the PPG was observed on the noticeboards. The practice's latest CQC rating was also presented near the reception desk.
- Almost all the seating in the waiting area was the same fixed benches at a single height, only one chair with arms was observed, and this was also being used to prevent people from going upstairs. There was space in the waiting area for wheelchairs and pushchairs.
- The signage for navigating around the practice was adhoc and we observed some signage covered up using laminated sheets to change direction to clinical rooms.
- The signage for the toilet was visible from all parts of the waiting area, but no other signage was available to guide you down the corridor.

Interactions between staff and patients:

- Of our visits to the Collington practice sites this was the quietest in terms of patient activity. With no patients arriving for appointments, and only a few popping in with admin enquiries.
- From what we were able to observe staff were generally helpful.

Conversations with staff and PPG

During our visit to the main branch site (Pebsham) we were also able to meet with the Practice Managers and a member of the PPG covering the four Collington practices. During these conversations we explored:

- What they thought the practice did well
- What could be improved
- How they currently engage patients about their experiences
- What support or resources (from system partners or others) could help the practice to improve

Key themes identified included:

Generally, the practice felt they received positive feedback about peoples' experiences of clinicians, although they do hear about difficulties for patients to access appointments, but this was felt to be a wider issue experienced across the country.

The practice has an active PPG which had recently grown following engagement activity carried out on the ongoing proposal to close the Sea Road site. This recent expansion did mean that some work needed to be done to get the new members embedded and up to speed on the role of the PPG.

The PPG did also highlight that they were keen to reintroduce some activity that they had previously carried out including regularly spending time in practice waiting rooms talking to patients about their experiences and feedback.

The Friends and Family Test results were highlighted as a way that the practice currently incorporate patient feedback. The results are regularly taken to governance and PPG meetings so that the practice can understand what patients overall experience of the service was like. It was acknowledged that currently the survey is predominantly shared via text after a patients had an appointment with the practice and more work could be done to provide physical copies of the questions.

We also discussed the impact of the change following the Vita Healthcare take over. The practice and PPG were aware of public and patient concerns that may stem from misinformation about Vita Healthcare and their role. Although these concerns were not often being brought directly to the practice, they were aware of discussion online. It was felt that some more information about Vita Healthcare, who they are and what they do may be of benefit.

The practice also shared that despite being part of a central Vita Healthcare website they are able to share content for uploading to it to keep relevant information available to the practice's patients.

What patients told us

During our visits we were able to speak to 12 patients from across three of the sites. We were unable to speak to patients at Sea Road as there were no appointments taking place at the time of our visit

Pebsham

- Of the patients we spoke to some shared that their experiences of the staff had been good. With some saying that their appointments on the day were excellent and staff were very attentive and efficient.
- We heard from patients who had found it difficult to make appointments with the practice. There were concerns that people were being pushed to use digital methods. Some found that they were unable to book things in-person at the practice or over the phone and they “always get signposted to digital with little support from staff”. Others shared frustrations at the lack of face-to-face appointments or being unable to see a GP.
- Patients also shared that they were unaware if there were any non-digital ways to share their views about their experiences. Other reasons for not sharing feedback with the practice was that it was “so hard to contact them” and others felt they wouldn’t be listened to if they did.

Collington

- As with Pebsham we heard from patients who had positive experience of the staff within the practice. With people reporting that staff had been ‘lovely’ and very helpful. We also heard from people who generally had a positive experience with the practice with someone sharing that they ‘love this surgery’.
- We heard mixed feedback about the process for getting an appointment and triaging. With one patient reporting that it had recently gotten better, and their last few experiences getting appointments were more positive as previously this had been very difficult. Whereas others had experience long waits to get an appointment and they were regularly having to follow up to confirm details of next steps whilst waiting.

Ninfield

- The patients we spoke to at Ninfield were generally positive about their experiences with the staff within the practice. In particular the reception team working during our visit were praised by everyone we spoke to.
- We did hear from someone who found this wasn’t always the case and they had previously had a negative experience with a reception member which was made worse as they felt this was overheard by people in the waiting room due to its size and layout.
- Some patients did flag it could be difficult to get an appointment, and this had gotten worse since the changes to the practice. Some raised this was due to feeling like there is only one method and this was digital, which was frustrating. Others also found it was difficult to get an appointment at the Ninfield branch and they were having to have appointments further away in other Collington branches despite being a patient at Ninfield for a long time.

Mystery shopping

Website findings

- Overall, our mystery shoppers found the website clear, accessible, and generally well laid out. However, there were instances where the relationship between the different locations and Vita caused confusion.

Finding the practice site online

- All Vita Healthcare practices share the same central website. From our mystery shop we found that on the website some information, i.e. opening times, staff and contact details, is differentiated by branch location and other information i.e. complaints, and prescription requests seem to apply to all practices in the group.
- For the first part of the activity, we asked our mystery shoppers to find the practice website online. All four of the branch locations (Pebsham, Collington, Sea Road and Ninfield) that Collington delivers services from have an individual presence on the central Vita Healthcare website, and our mystery shoppers found this either easy or very easy to find. Most found that by putting the location name into their search engine they were immediately taken to an individual dedicated page on the shared website.



<https://www.vita.healthcare/July 2026>

- Some of our mystery shoppers did say that this could cause confusion amongst patients, particularly for anyone who was unaware of the connection to Vita Healthcare. There was also added confusion when looking through some of the information as the four Collington sites were grouped in different ways and referred to with different terminology in different parts of the site.

Individual branch location information

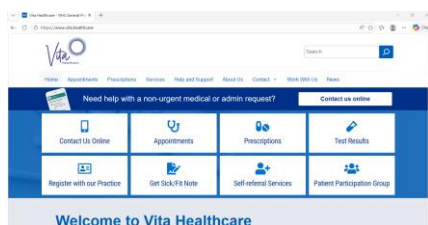
- On the central website each of the four Collington locations feature in the footer (with phone number and address), they each also have their own page on the website. The individual pages provided some information about the branch, which our mystery shoppers found easy to find. These included:

- Phone number
- Opening hours
- Address
- Accessibility information
- Parking information

- The individual pages for each surgery site are completely independent in terms of the information, and no reference is made to them being branch locations for Collington practice.
- It was also noted that the opening hours on the website pages, did seem to differ to those on the doors of the sites during our visit. As the posters on all the front doors indicated that the sites were closed for lunch between 1pm and 2pm (a message that is also shared on the phone message if called between this time), this was not mentioned on the website pages.

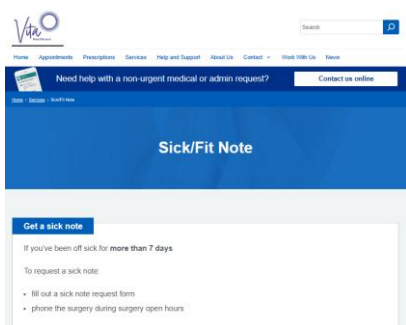
Grouped information

- All the other information we asked our Mystery Shoppers to find was not separated by practice site. This included:
 - A complaints policy
 - Latest CQC report
 - PPG information
 - Friends and Family Test (FFT) results and Feedback
 - Accessibility statement
 - Staff names
- Our mystery shoppers found the accessibility statement was easiest to find as it was located in the footer of the website and therefore viewable from every page. The complaints policy required more digging from our mystery shoppers and was either found through use of the search bar or multiple clicks through from the 'About page'
- Individual branch names were not used consistently across the site. In some areas different terminology was used to group the branches, which may not be recognisable to patients. For information on the PPG and CQC results it appeared the four branches were grouped together under Collington. But information on registering with the practice or the FFT results were grouped as 'Vita Bexhill'
- For another part of our activity, we provided our Mystery Shoppers with six scenarios that may be commonplace for a patient to do on a practice website, and asked if it was clear from the website how this could be achieved. The scenarios included:
 1. Make, change or cancel an appointment
 2. Get a repeat prescription
 3. Get a sick note for work
 4. Get test results
 5. Register with/join the practice
 6. Feeding back about your experience



- For many of these scenarios our mystery shoppers understood clearly from the website how this could be achieved due to the layout of the home page. Eight 'quick links' are prominently displayed on the home page and are communicated using images and text.

<https://www.vita.healthcare/>
July 2026



<https://www.vita.healthcare/>
July 2026

- Using these links led you to a page with information on the steps you could take to achieve the task. It was noted that having this prominently on the homepage was an effective way of helping patients to access what they needed quickly and minimised any need for multiple steps of navigation throughout the site.

- For registering with/joining the practice the layout of the page was less clear, as initially it seemed like the only option was an online form. However, when our mystery shoppers scrolled further down the page it was clear that a physical form was available. When using the online form and choosing your surgery the four branch sites were again grouped together under the group name 'Vita Bexhill' which some people may find confusing.
- The scenario that our mystery shoppers found most difficult to identify was how patients could feedback about their experience, as there was no obvious link from the home page. To find any information on feedback they had to use the search bar, or to search within other pages of the website.
- From both using the search bar and looking through other pages, they were able to find a 'have your say' area which provided different channels for leaving feedback. These included Friends and Family test (FFT), signposting to Care Opinions, and the Ipsos Mori Patient Survey, although there was no information on how to leave feedback directly to the practice. At the time of our mystershop the FFT page didn't not have any information available.

Phone message findings

When it came to undertaking our Mystery Shop of the phone messaging, we discovered all four of the Collington practice branches shared the same number. This refers to 'Vita Healthcare Bexhill' without any reference to the individual branch names which may be confusing for some people.

Out of hours

- Overall, our mystery shoppers found the information provided by the out of hours message clear, and in plain English. They rated it highly in terms of clarity, quality and usefulness of information.
- The message provided some signposting information including to the practice's website, and an option for changing, altering or canceling an appoint via the phone. The message did signpost to some other services including 999 in an emergency and NHS 111. It did not provide information related to prescriptions and how to access test results.
- Aspects such as volume, sound quality, tone/clarity of voice and speed of message were rated highly by the mystery shoppers.



- At the time of our mystery shop there was also a message included about issues the practice was having at the time with its website and so they expected their phone line to be busier than usual.
- One of our mystershoppers noted that they rang at 1pm not expecting this to be 'Out-of-hours', as their search for the phone number of the practice website did not mention the practice being closed for lunch (see page 18).

In hours phone messaging

- Our mystery shoppers also rated the in-hours message highly in terms of clarity of the information provided. They reported the quality of the information was high, with the options menu providing clear and distinct choices.
- At the time of our mystery shop the message signposted to 999 in an emergency and provided some information about accessing prescriptions. There was no information about other health services such as ILL, Pharmacies or Minor Injuries Units.
- As with the out of hours message, our mystery shoppers received a message about the practice currently having difficulties with its website, so the phone lines were expected to be busier than usual.
- Aspects such as volume, sound quality, tone and clarity of voice and speed of message and the message length were rated highly by the mystery shoppers.

Conclusion

Collington surgery operates out of four branch sites. In general, these sites are well maintained, accessible and clear to navigate through for patients. There is variation in the layout in some of the branches which may vary patient experience, including differences in private space available at reception and limited seating options in waiting rooms.

The Pebsham waiting area is well laid out and enables patients to move freely from the entrance to reception and does facilitate some privacy with the layout of the check in screen. The signage from the waiting area is limited which may make navigating around the branch difficult.

The foyer area of Collington was a nice welcoming space that provided extensive information to patients as they enter the building. The outside area could be made clearer with movement of some signs so that they aren't blocked by the door and clear signage if patients are permitted to park in the front area.

As the smallest of the branches, Ninfield is limited in its waiting area and the privacy it can offer patients initially entering the building and talking to staff. However, the set up of the notice boards was particularly clear and accessible, enabling patients to find what they are the looking for.

Sea Road was the most unkept of the practices with a clear need for maintenance in areas, it also had the least effective signage both inside and out. The central signage (opening times, staff) differed completely from the other practices in terms of design and style.

From our conversations with patients, it is clear there is confusion relating to the role of Vita Healthcare and that all four branches now fall under the umbrella of Collington Surgery. This causes confusion amongst patients about why they have to travel to different locations that they do not recognise as 'their own' practice. This confusion may also be furthered by the website and the different ways that it reference the practice and branches (see page 18).

Feedback from patients during the visits generally indicated positive experiences of the staff encountered. This was supported by our observations during the visits of helpful and friendly staff at all four branches. However, concerns were raised by patients about the triage process and the feeling of being pushed to digital and the difficulties they face when making appointments, as well as long wait for appointments

It was positive to hear about the growing PPG and the plans it had to embed new members and make sure they were up to speed with the PPG's ways of working. Although more information in the practices themselves could be used to promote the PPG not only in terms of recruiting new members but also highlighting what they do and how patients can share feedback with them.

Throughout all our activity we found limited information on how patients can provide feedback to the practice. Three of the four sites did have suggestions boxes but no additional resources or explanation of how these could be used. Information related to feedback was also limited and difficult to find on the website. When available, information about feedback also often signposted people to other organisations and no information was provided on how feedback is used or responded to by the practice.

Both the website and phone messages were viewed as effective overall, and it was positive to see up-to date information could be added to the phone message when issues arise that may impact patients.

Recommendations



Environment

- **External signage on the front of the practices could be made clearer** by increasing the size and being placed in more visible areas, for example a free-standing sign in the grass area outside Pebsham, or close to the road at Ninfield and Collington.
- **Clarify and update the signage at Collington practice regarding parking** and whether patients are permitted to park in the space.
- **Standardise signage used across the branches** making it recognisable and easy to follow. Any signage should be placed at a readable eye level, make use of standardised symbols and feature higher contrasting text and backgrounds.
- **Where doorbells are present signage should be provided** and clear on what the bell can be used for, to improve patient accessibility.
- Consider **grouping information on notice boards** in the waiting area by theme or topic with headers and titles, as seen in Ninfield and Collington, and ensure the information is regularly reviewed and kept up to date.
- **Increase the variety of chairs available in the waiting room at all the branches** to include ones of different heights and sizes to cater for different needs.
- **Consider how private space can be achieved in reception areas** and make sure it is clearly signed how patients can request these if required.



Phone and Website

- Explore how the information relating to providing **feedback can be more accessible from the website homepage**, through a direct link or higher profile information. Ensure information is also readily available on **how you can feedback directly to the practice**.
- Provide more information on the website about what patients can do by visiting the front desk to **clarify access pathways**.
- On the 'Register with our practice' page **move the information about the paper form closer to the top**.
- Explore how you can **signpost to other relevant services such as pharmacies through the phone messages**.



Practice Processes

- **Agree what terminology will be used when referring to Collington and the four branch sites.** Make sure what's agreed is replicated in all areas and is effectively communicated with patients via various communication channels including online, in the practices and via written communication.
- **Share more information about the PPG across all four of the branch sites.** Including information on how to join and how patients can provide feedback to them.
- Ensure **opening times are clearly available and are the same** on the website as on the doors of the practice.
- Identify and implement **alternative methods for capturing patient feedback**, including through in-person events, dedicated survey or PPG activity in the practice to diversify the feedback approaches. Ensure the results of this activity are reported back to patients to close the feedback loop and demonstrate the impact of sharing feedback.
- **Develop and share communications relating to the triaging process** in place at the practice to increase patient understanding. This information should be shared in a variety of ways including online, in the surgery, and through explaining to patients who are visiting the practice.
- **Develop communications to explain the role of 'Vita Healthcare'** to increase awareness amongst patients. As with the above this should be shared with patients in a variety of ways.
- **Embed regular review activities**, such as mystery shops and accessibility/environmental audits into practice and PPG work plans to routinely capture patient experience and support ongoing development.

Response from Vita Healthcare

We would like to thank Healthwatch East Sussex and its volunteers for undertaking this work and, particularly, the patients, staff and members of our Patient Participation Group who contributed their experiences.

We are pleased that the report reflects the dedication of our teams, with Healthwatch observing welcoming, friendly and helpful interactions with patients across our sites. This is also reflected in the GP Patient Survey findings regarding patients' experience of their healthcare professionals. We are grateful to our clinical, reception and administrative teams for the work they do for our patients every day.

We welcome the practical recommendations around accessibility, signage, patient information, feedback and communication. There are a number of straightforward improvements identified within the report which we will work through with our practice team and Patient Participation Group.

The report also identifies two broader areas where we believe better communication and engagement with our patients will be particularly important.

Digital access and understanding how general practice is changing

The way patients access NHS services is changing nationally. The NHS 10 Year Health Plan identifies moving **from analogue to digital** as one of the three major shifts for the NHS over the coming decade, with increasing use of digital services and the NHS App intended to make accessing and managing care easier for patients.

We therefore recognise the report's finding that patients are noticing an increased emphasis on digital access.

Our responsibility is to do a better job of explaining **why** this change is happening, how digital access and triage work, and how they can help us understand a patient's needs and direct them towards the most appropriate care.

At the same time, we recognise that patients have different needs and levels of confidence with technology. As services become increasingly digital, we need to ensure that patients who need additional support are not disadvantaged. The national strategy similarly recognises digital inclusion as an important part of this transition.

We will therefore continue developing our digital services while working with patients and our PPG to improve understanding of the triage process, communicate the different ways patients can contact us and support those who may find digital access more difficult.

Response from Vita Healthcare

One surgery, one team

Healthwatch has also identified some confusion amongst patients about the relationship between our different surgery sites and Vita Healthcare. We recognise this finding and believe it provides an important opportunity for improvement.

Our branch sites have long histories within their individual communities, and we value those identities and relationships. However, today they form part of **one GP surgery caring for one registered patient population through one combined team.**

Working in this way allows us to share our workforce, clinical expertise and facilities and gives us greater flexibility and resilience in providing care. This can sometimes mean that the most appropriate or earliest available care for a patient is provided from a different site from the one they have historically regarded as their local surgery.

We recognise that we have not always communicated this clearly enough based on the feedback we have received here.

Our aim is therefore for patients to understand that although care may be delivered from different branch locations, they remain patients of **one surgery supported by one team.**

Vita Healthcare provides a wider shared identity for our teams and reflects our ambition to work collaboratively rather than as separate organisational silos. Healthwatch's findings demonstrate that we also need to explain this more clearly and use consistent terminology across our website, telephone systems, premises and patient communications.

We will use the recommendations in this report not only to make practical improvements within our premises, but also to improve how we communicate access, triage, patient feedback and the relationship between our surgery sites and Vita Healthcare.

We look forward to continuing this work with our patients, our Patient Participation Group and Healthwatch East Sussex.

healthwatch

East Sussex

Healthwatch East Sussex
Unit 31
The Old Printworks
1 Commercial Road
Eastbourne
BN21 3XQ



www.healthwatcheastsussex.co.uk



0333 101 4007



enquiries@healthwatcheastsussex.co.uk



[Facebook.com/HealthwatchEastSussex](https://www.facebook.com/HealthwatchEastSussex)



[Healthwatcheastsussex](https://www.instagram.com/Healthwatcheastsussex)



[Healthwatcheastsussex](https://www.linkedin.com/company/HealthwatchEastSussex)