



Grove Road Surgery October 2026

healthwatch
East Sussex

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Healthwatch East Sussex

Healthwatch East Sussex (HWES) are the local independent watchdog for health and social care services. We gather back 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 back 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: 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.

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

We regularly hear a range of back 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 several 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 Grove Road Surgery 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 Grove Road Surgery about involvement with the project. Following an initial project overview meeting with practice staff a visit was undertaken to the site on the 24th of June.

The visit was undertaken by two HWES volunteers and one staff member. They were joined on the day by the surgery's Practice Manager and members of the Patient Participation Group, who provided access to the site and answered questions.



During the visit, they:

- 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 Manager and PPG representatives
- Talked with patients that were present on the day about their experiences

As well as the visits, HWES staff and volunteers also conducted a mystery shop of the surgery's website and phone message to understand the patient experience of engaging with the practice through these methods.

The mystery shops used a mix of prescribed questions and scenarios to review the website and 'in-hours' and 'out-of-hours' 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?

Please note, this report relates to findings observed during the date and time of the visit, 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

[Grove Road Surgery](#) is a GP practice located in Eastbourne Town Centre.

As of April 2026, the practice list size was 5,843.

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 April 2016, and they receive an overall **Good** rating.

Although this is the surgery's last published inspection, we acknowledge that it was undertaken prior to the practice's current management arrangement.

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 back 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 Grove Road recently. We had heard mixed back from people using the service including:

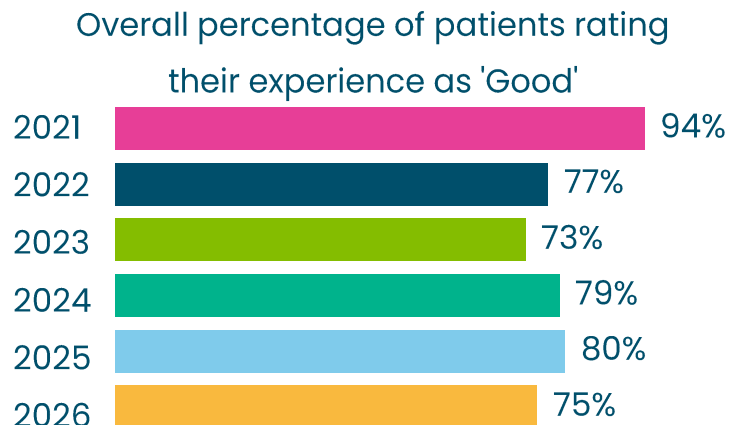
- Concerns around difficulties accessing face-to-face appointments, and the impact of this on patients with communications needs.
- Negative experiences of the complaints processes and feeling like the practice did not listen.
- Experiences of excellent care where patients reported feeling they had ample time to discuss their needs.

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:



Higher than the national average:

- 76% of respondents rated their **experience of contacting the practice** as Good (73%)
 - Contact by phone – 66% Good vs 57% nationally
 - Contact by website – 67% Good vs 58% nationally
 - Contact by NHS App – 66% Good vs 54% nationally
- 46% of respondents **usually get to see or speak to their preferred healthcare professional** when they would like to (42%)
- 94% of respondents 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:

- 85% of respondents rated the **helpfulness of the practice reception and administrative team** as Helpful (85%)
- 84% of respondents knew what the **next step would be after contacting the practice** (84%)
- 85% of respondents rated the health professional(s) as Good at **listening to the patient** (87%)

Lower than the national average:

- 75% of respondents rated their **overall experience of the practice** as Good (77%)
- 55% of respondents were **offered a choice of time or day** when they last tried to make an appointment (57%)
- 8% of respondents were **offered a choice of location** when they last tried to make a general practice appointment (16%)
- 78% of respondents rated the health professional(s) as Good at **treating the patient with care and concern** (86%)
- 87% of respondents indicated their **needs as a patient were met** (90%)

The full survey results can be found on the GP Patient Survey website [here](#).

Audit findings

On the day of our visit, the team began by carrying out an 'audit' of the external and internal environment to understand the experience from a patient's perspective.

From our exploration of the external area we found:

- Due to the town centre location of the surgery, there is no dedicated car parking. Paid-for parking is available directly outside the surgery and on the surrounding roads. The town centre location does mean this can get busy. There is a disabled parking bay directly outside the surgery with space for two cars. However, this also serves the surrounding businesses and has a maximum permitted stay of 3 hours. The surgery also has a bay for doctors parking.
- The surgery's location positions it well for public transport access. Eastbourne train station is less than 10 minutes' walk away and is well served by train lines and bus routes.



The front of the practice

- The building has large black lettering displayed out front with the surgery's name; this is well contrasted on the exterior wall. Other signage from the front of the building, including the surgery's opening times, was limited. Many looked to have been made in-house and no bigger than A4, which required someone to be up close to read them.
- The entrance to the surgery requires patients to pass through two sets of manual doors to access reception. There is a doorbell for people to use if they need assistance entering the building. However, the signage for using this was small and wearing away.

Once in the building we observed:

- The inside of the building was light, clear and obstacle free, helping people to navigate their way around the practice.
- The reception area and both the upstairs and downstairs waiting areas were pleasant, calm environments that didn't feel too clinical. The layout meant that the reception areas were easy to find, and the space felt well spread so patients could move around easily and wheelchair accessible pathways were observed.



Upstairs waiting room

- The visit team noted that the reception desk did include a lowered section to provide access for a wheelchair. However, this was not accessible at the time due to the space immediately in front being used for more seating.
- Our team did not observe a private space at reception that would allow patients to speak to staff confidentially. However, music was being played downstairs, which could help with covering up conversations.
- In the waiting area, there were 2 types of chairs available, some with and some without arms. Chairs of different sizes and heights were not observed. Space was available for wheelchairs and pushchairs to wait.



Toilet signage

- Navigating around the inside of the surgery was supported by signage, with consultation rooms and toilets clearly signed using pictures, words and high contrast colours (black text on a white background).
- There was also signage relating to the medical staff working in the surgery, however, minimal other signage was observed. Our team were told on the day that the surgery was undergoing some redecoration, so some noticeboards and posters had been taken down. We have taken this into account when writing our recommendations.

Interactions between staff and patients:

- Whilst at the practice the team observed multiple positive interactions between staff and patients. These included patients coming in to ask questions and to check-in for appointments.
- During the visit we were pleased to see staff were responsive and polite. When patients came in with questions and an individual member of staff couldn't answer, this was progressed to someone else.

Conversations with staff and PPG

During our visits to the surgery, we were also able to speak with two members of the practice staff and two members of their PPG. 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:

Overall, staff and PPG members felt that the practice has been improving, with positive experiences shared about the process of Vita Healthcare managing the practice. This change had provided an opportunity for practices to support each other, and the PPG felt the management listened and respond to the group's back when provided.

There was a mixed understanding about the process of the Friends and Family Test (FFT) within the practice. Staff shared that this was sent to patients via text following visits, however, the PPG were less clear on this process and weren't aware of the results.

A member of staff flagged that a private area downstairs would be useful, a finding also supported by our audit earlier in the visit.

Both staff and the PPG acknowledged that work needed to be done to advertise the role of the PPG and make it more accessible to patients either to join or to share back with.

Across our conversations mixed experiences of the triage process were shared. It was flagged that although online is not always the preferred method for some patients, this can help to keep the phone wait down. Staff also shared that the triage process is done the same way for all patients, so if someone calls up a member of the team will go through the form with them.

What patients told us

During our visit we were able to speak to 8 patients.

- Of the patients we spoke to, some shared that they felt that practice communication was good and that there had been recent improvements.

- “Good organisation and communication”
- “They are better than they were”

- We also heard from patients who had experienced long wait times and challenges when trying to get an appointment.

- Some people shared good experiences of the staff at the practice.

- “I see nurses and medics the most – they are all good people”

- As with our conversations with staff and the PPG, we heard mixed back about the triage process, with some sharing that it wasn’t “user friendly”. Some also raised concerns about how this new process can be a problem for people that don’t use computers.

- We also asked patients about their experience of sharing back with the practice. Some shared they hadn’t as they didn’t feel they needed to as their experiences had been good. Others confirmed they had used the FFT when this was sent to them following a visit, and others had never been asked. We also heard from patients who had fed back to the surgery directly.

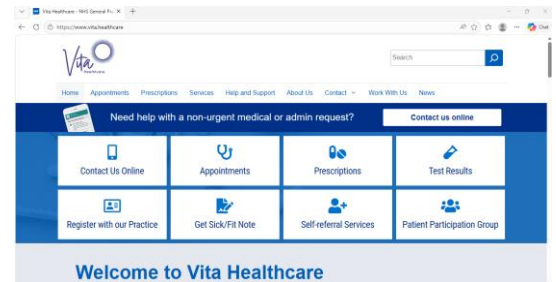
- “Not needed as it’s been good so far”
- “No – but I would if I thought it was necessary”

Mystery shopping

Website findings

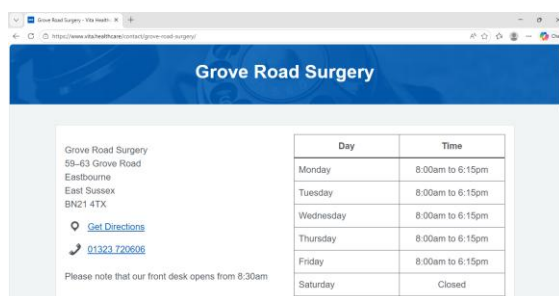
- Overall back from our mystery shoppers identified that the website was generally well laid out and the information was clear, accurate and useful.

- When given the practices name, our mystery shoppers were able to find the website using a search engine. However, this was slightly confusing due to the practice information sitting on a central Vita Healthcare website. It was felt that patients would need to be aware of the link between the practice and Vita for this to make sense.



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

- The Vita Healthcare website is centrally run, with information about the group's 10 practices on one site. Some information is differentiated by practice i.e., opening times, staff and contact details but some information seems to be applied to all practices i.e., signposting to other services, complaints information, and requesting a prescription.



<https://www.vita.healthcare/contact/grove-road-surgery/> July 2026

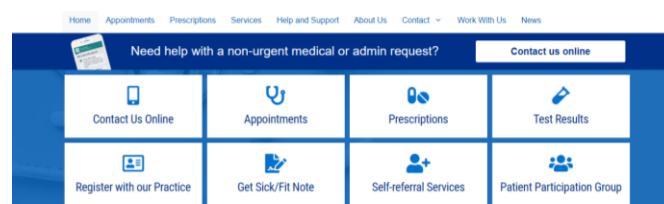
- We asked our mystery shoppers to back how they found some general information about Grove Road whilst on the website. Of these they reported that they were able to find the following easily:

- Phone number
- Opening hours
- Address
- Information about the Patient Participation Group

- It was also noted that the opening hours on the website page, did seem to differ to those on the doors of the site during our visit. As the poster on the front door indicated that the surgery was closed for lunch between 1pm and 2pm. This is not mentioned on the website.
- A lot of this information was easy to navigate to from the homepage. However, some information was harder to find, particularly around information on the Friends and Family Test (FFT) and making a complaint. This required more searching with some mystery shoppers only finding it through using the search bar and others doing more detailed exploration through the menus, eventually finding it through "About Us – back".
- It was also noted that whilst there was a form to digitally complete the FFT, the section which looked to report on results said that there was 'no data'.

- When looking at ways to contact the practice, the mystery shoppers found information about digital access including 'contact us online' forms and signposting to the NHS App. It was also easy to find the phone number for the practice and the opening hours, including the time that the front desk opened.
- It was noted that some clarity could be provided about what patients were able to do via the 'front desk' as on the appointment page it is explained that *"Please note that we are not booking on the day appointments at Front Desk"* but no other information was provided.
- For another part of the activity, our mystery shoppers were tasked with 6 scenarios that may be commonplace for a patient to do on a practice website. These were:
 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. Giving back about your experience

- Our mystery shoppers found that many of these scenarios were easily achieved, due to the layout of the home page which provides eight 'quick links', many of which covered our scenarios.



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

- For many of the tasks, using these links led you to a page where you were provided with clear information on the steps you could take to achieve the task. This was highlighted as an effective way of helping patients to get where they need to go quickly and minimised any need for lots of navigation around the site.
- For registering with/joining the practice the layout of the page was less clear in terms of the available methods 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.
- However, our mystery shoppers did flag that it was less simple to find information about leaving back, as there was no obvious link from the home page. As with the FFT mentioned earlier, to find this information you either 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 back. These included, Friends and Family Test, signposting to Care Opinions, and the Ipsos Mori Patient Survey, although there was no information about how to back directly to the practice.

Out of hours phone message findings

- Overall, our mystery shoppers found the information provided by the out of hours message clear, and in plain English.

- The message started by providing some basic information including the practice's name, signposting to the website, and signposting to other health and care services. Our mystery shoppers did note that the message also references Vita Healthcare as part of the surgery name, which was seen as positive for building the brand recognition among patients.
- The message also flagged to the caller that the practice was "*short staffed today so phone waits may be longer than normal*". The inclusion of this in an 'out of hours' message was queried by our mystery shoppers as potentially suggesting the message may not be up to date.
- The message did include some signposting to other services including 999 in an emergency and to NHS 111. However, 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. The order of the message content was noted as an issue, particularly that it took 33 seconds to say that the practice was closed.

In hours phone message findings

- 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 Pharmacy First for minor illnesses such as sore throat, earache and UTI's.
- As with the out of hours message, all our mystery shoppers received a message about the practice being "short staffed today so phone waits may take longer than usual".
- Once the initial message finished an option menu was shared with five choices (Appointments, Prescriptions, Palliative or bereavement calls, Sick notes, General enquiries), all of which led to further messaging.
- One of our mystery shoppers did note that the message, including once you have picked an option, refers to the practices website frequently which may negatively impact patients who can't/don't use the website. For prescriptions, the message says you are no longer able to request this via the phone and instead says to use the website or the NHS App.
- 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

Grove Road Surgery operates from a well maintained and accessible premises. The building is well supported by public transport, but due to the location there is no dedicated patient parking.

Access to the building is supported by a large sign out front which helps to distinguish the practice from the surrounding buildings. However, additional signage outside is limited and often small.

Entry to the building is facilitated by two manual doors, these are sometimes propped open, and a bell is available for those needing support to enter. The signage that sat alongside the bell was limited and wearing away.

Once inside, the practice is light, clear and obstacle free providing space to navigate and move around the space, and two waiting areas were available. The reception space does lack a private space for patients to have conversations with staff and the drop-down section of the desk designed for wheelchair accessibility is currently unusable as it is blocked by chairs.

back gathered during the visit indicated generally positive patient experiences particularly with the staff they had encountered. Concerns were raised about the timeliness of appointments and the triaging process.

The practice currently has an engaged PPG and it was positive to hear the shared ambition from staff and members to grow the group and increase its reach.

The practice could benefit from improved information on leaving back both in person and online, with a lack of a clear route to share back and mismatched experiences of the Friends and Family Test, highlighted through our conversations with staff, PPG members and patients.

Both the website and phone messages were overall viewed as effective however some issues were raised regarding out-of-date information or difficulties in accessing some resources.

In response to our findings a full list of recommendations can be found on the following pages.

Recommendations



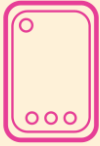
Environment

- **External signage on the front doors of the practice could be made clearer** by increasing the size and unifying the design. Any signage should be placed at a readable eye level, make use of standardised symbols and feature higher contrasting text and backgrounds. The signage for the doorbell should be made larger and made clear on what the bell can be used for.
- As part of the current redecoration activity the inclusion of any **new posters or notice boards should consider height, the use of high contrast text and background and the use of imagery**. Where possible information should be grouped around themes or areas with headers and titles, so it is easy for patients to navigate and find what they are looking for.
- Look at alternative layout options of the downstairs waiting area to **free up the space surrounding the lowered part of the reception desk**, so that it is accessible for wheelchair users.
- Explore **options for adding a private space**, or a dedicated room for patients to speak with reception staff privately if required. If added ensure there is sufficient signage to indicate its availability.
- **Increase the variety of chairs available in the waiting room**, including ones of different heights and sizes to cater for different requirements.



Website

- Explore how the information relating to providing **back can be more accessible from the homepage**, through a direct link or higher profile information. Ensure information is also readily available on **how you can back directly to the practice**.
- Include more **up to date information from the practices Friends and Family Test** on the relevant page, including recent results and any changes that have been made as a result of back.
- 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**.



Phone messaging

- Look at **reorganising the structure of the out-of-hours messaging** so it makes it known earlier that the practice is closed.
- Explore how the messaging could be **adapted to reassure people without digital access that the service is still accessible**. This could be through minimising the references to the website or by adding options for alternative access methods.
- Check that all in-hours and out-of-hours **messaging content is up to date**.



Practice Processes

- **Share information and results about the Friends and Family Test results with the PPG more regularly** so that this can help shape future activity and be used to identify areas for improvement.
- Ensure **opening times are clearly available and are the same** on the website as on the doors of the practice.
- Identify **alternative methods for capturing patient back**, including through in-person events, dedicated survey or PPG activity in the practice to diversify the back approaches. Ensure the results of this activity are reported back to patients to close the back loop and demonstrate the impact of sharing back.
- Explore options for more **advertisement of the PPG to increase membership**, including through local networks, printed material in the networks and advertisements in local media. And develop resources to empower and enable the PPG to capture and act on the back received.
- **Develop and share communications relating to the triaging process** in place at the practice to increase patient awareness. 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.

Response from Vita Healthcare

Vita Healthcare would like to thank Healthwatch East Sussex, its volunteers, the patients who contributed to this review, and the members of our Patient Participation Group (PPG) for taking the time to share their experiences and observations.

We welcome the opportunity for independent back and are pleased that the report recognises the positive progress being made at Grove Road Surgery.

In particular, we are encouraged by the back regarding the professionalism, responsiveness and kindness of our staff, the welcoming environment of the practice, and the improvements experienced by patients since Vita Healthcare assumed responsibility for the surgery. We are also pleased that members of our PPG feel listened to and supported by the practice's management team.

Our staff work extremely hard to deliver high-quality, compassionate care in an increasingly challenging primary care environment, and it is important that their dedication and the improvements achieved are recognised.

Access to appointments and clinical triage

We recognise that accessing general practice services can sometimes be frustrating for patients, particularly when demand is high or when patients are unfamiliar with newer systems of accessing care.

Our clinical triage arrangements are designed to ensure that patients are assessed according to their clinical needs and directed to the most appropriate professional or service. Importantly, patients are not required to use digital technology to access care. Those who prefer to telephone the practice, or who are unable to use online services, can still have their requests submitted and assessed through the same clinical process.

We acknowledge that we can do more to explain these arrangements clearly, and we will continue to improve the information available to patients about accessing our services.

We are also encouraged by the 2026 GP Patient Survey results, which demonstrate that Grove Road performs above the national average for overall experiences of contacting the practice, including telephone and digital access. Nevertheless, we recognise that positive comparative performance does not mean that every patient has a positive experience, and we remain committed to improving access and responsiveness.

Vita Healthcare

Response from Vita Healthcare

Accessibility and the practice environment

We welcome the practical recommendations relating to signage, reception accessibility and the availability of confidential conversations.

We will review these arrangements and implement appropriate improvements, ensuring that patients with disabilities, additional communication needs or concerns about confidentiality can access our services with dignity and confidence.

Patient engagement and back

We value the contribution of our Patient Participation Group and recognise the importance of ensuring that patients understand how they can share back, raise concerns and contribute to service development.

We will review how Friends and Family Test results and other patient back are communicated, both to our PPG and to the wider patient population, and consider how we can encourage greater participation.

We also recognise the importance of listening to back about patients' experiences of care, including areas identified through the national GP Patient Survey where further improvement may be possible.

Our ongoing commitment

Since taking responsibility for Grove Road Surgery, Vita Healthcare has been committed to strengthening the practice, supporting its staff and improving the services available to patients.

We are pleased that this progress has been recognised independently, while acknowledging that there is always more we can do.

We will consider Healthwatch's recommendations alongside our existing quality improvement and patient engagement work, prioritising changes that will make a meaningful difference to patients.

We remain committed to working collaboratively with our patients, staff, PPG and local partners to ensure that Grove Road Surgery continues to provide safe, accessible, compassionate and responsive primary care.

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