

Mystery Shopping of GP websites and out-of-hours messages in East Sussex

How informative and accessible are they?



Summary Report: February 2022

1 Introduction

This study is an independent review of the content of GP practice websites and out-of-hours phone messages across East Sussex. It has been undertaken by Healthwatch East Sussex volunteers and staff.

General Practitioners (GPs) represent the first port of call for many people in responding to both new and existing health and wellbeing needs.

As well as providing services directly to patients, GP practices also perform a key role in providing information, signposting and referring to other services, with guidance on how people can obtain support when surgeries are closed being especially important.

Providing accessible information helps people to make effective decisions on how and when to access services in the minimum number of steps, and how to self-care appropriately.

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This potentially reduces the number of enquiries and requests made to practices, which is particularly important when pressure on GPs and other health and care services is high, as is the case in late 2021.

1.1 Our aim

Our aim: *To provide an overview of the status of GP websites and out-of-hours phone messages, assessing how informative and accessible they currently are for people.*

This report provides a summary of the key themes identified from the review process. We have highlighted positive examples and best practice, together with the barriers and challenges identified by reviewers.

A number of recommendations have been proposed for GP practices, the commissioners of GP services and Healthwatch so that all parties can work collaboratively to develop and sustain high quality sources of information for residents in East Sussex.

1.2 Background

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic required GP practices to engage with patients and conduct appointments remotely unless there was an urgent need for a face-to-face consultation.

This in turn increased the importance of online and phone communication with patients in order to keep them up-to-date with changes to services and support them to get to the right service at the right time.

Whilst the speed of adopting remote and virtual forms of communication has been impressive, pressures on primary care services (doctors, dentists etc.) and the ongoing changes to other services has created challenges in ensuring public-facing information is kept accurate, up-to-date and accessible.

People have frequently told Healthwatch that it is not always clear what appointments or methods of contact are available, whether to use online booking systems and how to raise a concern or complaint. Knowing how to get health and care support outside of normal working hours is also often unclear.



Results from the 2021 GP Patient Survey¹ run by Ipsos MORI indicated that people in East Sussex haven't always found GP websites in East Sussex easy to use to get the information or services they are seeking, and this experience had got worse during the pandemic.

Table 1 - Ease of using GP practice's websites to look for information or access services - East Sussex averages 2021

| | Easy | Not easy |
|------|------|----------|
| 2021 | 75% | 25% |
| 2020 | 79% | 21% |

Healthwatch recognises the significant and ongoing pressures on GP practices to respond to high demand for services, update frequently changing information and communicate regularly with local people.

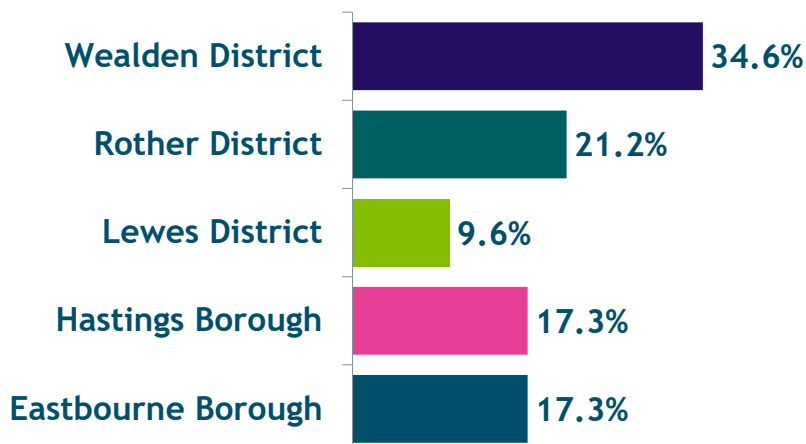
This review is focused on positively supporting practices, both individually and collectively, to understand lay experiences of the information they are presenting. Any barriers, gaps, omissions, or issues identified are accompanied by recommendations on how these could be overcome, improved, or changed for the better.

¹ <https://gp-patient.co.uk/about>

2 What we did...

During October and November 2021, Healthwatch staff and volunteers undertook a 'Mystery Shopping' review of the 52 websites² and out-of-hours phone messages used across GP practices in East Sussex.

Which East Sussex Local Authority area is the GP practice located in?



Of the practices websites we reviewed:

- 17 were in Wealden District
- 11 were in Rother District
- 5 were in Lewes District
- 9 were in Hastings Borough
- 9 were in Eastbourne Borough

We wanted to see if we could find key information about the practice and other health and community services without having to telephone or contact the practice directly, and to identify what was good, bad or indifferent about the website/message.

We reviewed:

- **Quality of information:** was it accurate, up-to-date and regularly refreshed?
- **Clarity of information:** was it clear and in plain language, and was it accessible to people with particular needs e.g. visual or hearing impairments. Was it available in other languages?
- **Ease of navigation** - was information easy to find, or is lots of searching required? *Websites only*
- **Presentation of information** - was information engaging in its use of text, images and diagrams? Was there too much or too little? Was it clear where to go for more assistance?



We used a standard set of questions for websites and out-of-hours phone messages so they could be compared in a uniform way.

² We recognise that there are more practices than websites, but this reflects some GPs operating in groups (Primary Care Networks) and having one shared website, even if they have multiple surgery sites.

Reviews were undertaken by eight Healthwatch volunteers and one Healthwatch staff member from a range of age groups and backgrounds. Each reviewer was provided with the name, website address and phone number of a set of GP practices. The process was tested and piloted before roll-out, and reviewers did not review their own practices.

Please note that not all the assessment questions were completed for each practice that was reviewed.

Percentages shown in this report are as a proportion of the total number websites or messages reviewed (identified above) unless otherwise stated.

We recognise that there may have been changes or amendments to websites and out-of-hours messages both during and after our review period. The reviews were current as at the end of the review process (14th November 2021).

3 Key Findings Summary

We undertook a ‘Mystery Shop’ review of 52 websites and out-of-hours phone messages for GP practices in East Sussex during October and November 2021. The summary below provides the key findings from this process.

3.1 GP websites

Our review of GP websites in East Sussex found that:

- Appointment options and triage mechanisms are not always explained on GP practice websites, with some providing limited detail on the options available and how to access them.
- Navigation on GP websites varied but was made more complicated by long or ambiguously titled menus and lots of page layers, making content challenging to access. The best examples used a combination of a well organised home page combined with clear menus to guide swift access to content.
- Not all websites had search tools or functionality, making it harder to find the content sought quickly and efficiently, especially if the design was complicated. Similarly, where present, search tools were not always easy to find.
- Few practice websites referred to any delays or increased wait times for patients as a result of the pandemic or other factors, either when contacting the surgery (especially by phone) or receiving an appointment.
- Staff information primarily focused on GPs, rather than other health professionals and practice staff. Contact details were not always publicly available for key individuals such as the practice manager.
- Accessibility features and information such as translation services, Browsealoud and details on the physical accessibility of surgeries varied considerably, with these and accessibility statements not featuring on all websites.
- Compliance information such as Care Quality Commission (CQC) ratings and reports were not present on all websites, with some examples that were present being out-of-date. Similarly, the NHS Friends and Family Test was often visible but often not clearly explained.
- Complaint processes, policies and timescales were not always easy to find, often with limited information on how to make a complaint about practices, rather than to a practice. Feedback mechanisms from patients to surgeries and vice-versa were not always clear and information (e.g. patient surveys results) not regularly shown.

- Information on Patient Participation Groups, Healthwatch, Advocacy Services, Carers or Veterans support was present on a majority of GP websites, but often wasn't easy to find and varied in detail.
- COVID-19 information, such as precautions, testing and vaccinations, wasn't present on all websites and was not always current or up-to-date. Information was a mix of what the practice was/wasn't doing in relation to COVID-19 vaccinations, how to access vaccinations and COVID-19 precautions when visiting practices face-to-face.
- GP websites were not always compatible or user-friendly when accessed from tablets and mobile phones rather than computers.

3.2 Out-of-hours messages

Our review of GP out-of-hours phone messages found that:

- Our calls connected to the practice promptly (generally in 5 rings or fewer). These were generally answered by a human rather than an automated voice and did not provide a menu of options for callers to use.
- Content of messages varied, generally including the practice name (but not in all cases), that it was closed, opening hours, and signposting to NHS 111 and 999. A few limited examples provided further information.
- Only one message mentioned the triage/appointment process in place at the practice, and only one indicated the possibility of delays or barriers for patients when contacting the practice.
- It was difficult to determine how up-to-date practice messages were, as no information on when they were posted is generally provided. Most of the content was regarded as current.
- Reviewers felt that messages could generally be improved by slowing down the speed of delivery, making the voice louder and ensuring that background noises were not present.
- Overall, messages were found to be factually accurate and generally provide information in a clear and accessible way. However, the information offered was regarded as relatively basic in most cases and offered little that most people would not already be aware of.

4 Response from East Sussex Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG)

The findings and recommendations set out in our report were shared with the East Sussex Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) who commission General Practices (GPs) across the county, and they provided the following response:

“We would like to thank Healthwatch East Sussex for this valuable report, which highlights the positive work that GP practices are doing in terms of their websites and their phone systems, and clear areas for further improvement.

We recognise how important it is that people can access helpful, informative and supportive information about health services, especially when they need help or care. We are working with GP practices to ensure that there is good quality, consistent information about their practice team and the care they provide, in order to support people to access advice and treatment appropriately.

Many of the recommendations made in this report align to work already underway with our GP practices; we have committed funding through the national Winter Access Fund and through other local Primary Care funding streams to ensure improvements are progressed rapidly. Improvements underway include close work with Healthwatch to develop an exemplar website, which includes adherence to accessibility standards and provides an example of how high-quality information can be provided to patients.

We intend to offer the opportunity to GP practices for them to develop their websites over the course of this year and help them, where necessary, to implement these positive changes. We would endorse the recommendation to include Patient Participation Group members and others in the ongoing role and use a GP practice’s website in order to ensure they are accessible and in line with the needs of patients and carers.

As part of our work to respond to feedback about access to primary care, we are also developing new telephony systems for practices, which will facilitate easier and more timely access; we will be rolling this out by mid-2022.

We would welcome the opportunity to continue to work with Healthwatch to assess the impact of these changes and improvements, and to ensure that their other recommendations to improve information and access for patients are taken forward.”

5 Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

5.1.1 GP websites

Effective, well-designed and well-maintained GP practice websites support patients in quickly accessing the information they need and may assist practices by reducing demand for phone and face-to-face enquiries.

This review has found that there was a wide variation in the design, quality, content and navigability of GP practice websites in East Sussex. Similarly, variation was also identified in the quality of out-of-hours phone messages, however, these were generally more consistent than websites.

We identified some good examples of well-maintained, regularly updated and engaging websites which present content in a patient-centric and user-friendly way. However, these were limited in number, and some sites were also identified as particularly poor.

Most GP websites were assessed by reviewers as having the bulk of the right content, but there were issues about how this was presented, particularly how easy it was to find quickly and efficiently. We recognise that each practice (or PCN) may have its own priorities, offer different services, or use different processes, but the inclusion of accessibility tools and core compliance documents should be universal, as should consideration of health literacy.

Home page design and navigation headings were identified as key areas for improvement. Prioritising content on those things most visit people a GP website for may simplify the process of developing and maintaining them. Similarly, adding search tools could help people find information quickly.

Given the increasing use of mobile technology, one key area for development is ensuring that practice websites are compatible with mobile phones and tablets, especially given the direction of travel for these devices as the 'go to' means by which people access the internet.

Both patients and staff could benefit from websites providing improved signposting to health, care and community services, especially those supporting mental health. As people look to trusted websites for information, the inclusion of mental health and other key service details on GP websites may help people access them, and free up practice capacity.

5.1.2 Out-of-hours messages

Most out-of-hours phone messages were found to be very short in duration (30 seconds or shorter) and provided only minimal information, largely identifying that the practice was closed and those with urgent/emergency needs should contact NHS111 or ring 999. However, these often didn't clarify what is meant by urgent or emergency.

Recorded messages did not generally provide any information of guidance to patients about any pressures, delays or wait times that they may experience in either contacting the practice or obtaining an appointment during normal operating hours. Similarly, very few signposted to the practice's own website or other sources of information.

The consensus amongst reviewers was that out-of-hours messages were not particularly useful, either to patients seeking specific information (as this was not generally provided), or to those requiring urgent or emergency support, as the services signposted to (NHS111/999) were widely known amongst the populace.

Whilst all out-of-hours messages for GP services should be well paced and clearly spoken at a volume that people can easily hear, consideration should also be given to help people undertake self-care or seek support from other services which may be operating e.g. Minor Injury Units, out-of-hours GP services, mental health support and pharmacies. By not providing other alternatives, people may automatically default to services such as Emergency Departments.

5.2 Recommendations

1. GP practice websites should provide an up-to-date home page that provides clear, simple and quick navigation to key pieces of information for all users.

GP practices should involve patients and other lay representatives (e.g. Patient Participation Groups) in regularly reviewing their websites (ideally quarterly, and at least annually), or during the development of new or updated websites.

NHS commissioners should share feedback and best practice on effective designs and content with and between practices and Primary Care Networks (PCNs).

2. The content most regularly used by patients and the public should be prioritised and made prominent and easy to access on GP websites. This could include:
 - Appointment processes and triage mechanisms, including contact details.
 - Clarity on opening hours, with clear information and contact details for support organisations, especially for urgent or emergency care out-of-hours.
 - Simple, plain English explanations about the meaning of clinical terms such as “urgent” “emergency” and “triage”. It should be made clear to patients how and when they should contact each service.
 - Information on any delays or wait times, where practices are experiencing high demand.
 - Accessibility information, including the accessibility and facilities available at practices and how people with disabilities can access support.
 - Language and translation features should be integrated and tested regularly.
 - Latest news (with dates) and updates on practice or wider health and care system issues.

Healthwatch should work with practices to develop a shortlist or checklist of the key content and operational functions valuable for inclusion on a GP practice website. This should align with recommendations proposed by Healthwatch in Sussex following input into the Sussex-wide System Pressures Task and Finish Group in mid-2021.

GP practice staff should engage with website hosts, developers and managers to obtain and review website analytics in order to better understand the most and least accessed webpages to help them organise content effectively.

3. All GP websites should include a search function to enable visitors to identify relevant content quickly and efficiently.

NHS Commissioners should provide resources (financial and/or support) to underpin sustainable improvements in the functionality and content of GP websites.

4. Website content (pages, articles, posts and documents) should have the date of production or posting included wherever possible. This will allow visitors to determine how up-to-date information is. It may also assist practice staff in managing and overseeing website content.

GP practices should include the date of posting on all website articles and content.

GP practices could explore how social media channels and streams could be embedded on their websites to simplify the development and sharing of news and content, especially where this changes regularly e.g. COVID-19 vaccination guidance.

5. Website accessibility, health literacy and quality of presentation all need to be considered and balanced when developing website content. Websites should be developed to meet NHS accessibility standards, and also be assessed through regular reviews and lay testing of content/formatting.

Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) or independent organisations such as Healthwatch could be approached to support regular reviews of GP practice websites to ensure that they meet accessibility standards, but also lay needs and expectations.

NHS Commissioner should communicate and re-iterate the accessibility standards to East Sussex practices.

6. Compliance information such as Care Quality Commission reports and ratings, data protection and privacy policies, and complaints processes (including to commissioners) should be up-to-date and clearly accessible on all websites. Local Healthwatch and Advocacy details should also be included on all GP websites.

NHS commissioners should undertake audits and spot-checks of practice websites to ensure they are meeting their statutory requirements.

7. Information on key watchdog and support organisations such Healthwatch and Independent Health Complaints Advocacy Services (IHCAS) should be included on all practice websites to support the independent capturing of feedback and provision of support to patients.

Healthwatch East Sussex should provide template website content to all GP surgeries in East Sussex identifying the role of Healthwatch, contact details and how to leave feedback. Information should also be provided on the Independent Health Complaints Advocacy Services (IHCAS).

8. GP practice out-of-hours phone messages should provide clear, simple and quick navigation for users to key pieces of information, including as a minimum:

- Practice name

- Practice opening hours
- When to call 999 or 111
- Brief details of support on their website
- The date when the message was last updated

Healthwatch East Sussex should collaborate with the Clinical Commissioning Group and Primary Care Networks to develop and share a checklist for out-of-hours message content to all GP surgeries in East Sussex.

9. Exploration of the technical functions of phone systems should be undertaken to assess the ability of systems to automatically re-direct patients to other services and support mechanism outside of normal practice practices.

NHS Commissioners could commission research or a practical exploration of the capabilities of the latest phone systems at GP practices to assess the viability of providing menus and options for callers out-of-hours, in the same way as they do during operating hours.

10. The outcomes and learning from this mystery shopping exercise should be shared with key stakeholders and inform the ongoing process of GP practices providing information to the public.

Healthwatch East Sussex should share the learning from this exercise with NHS Commissioners, other local Healthwatch and Healthwatch England to contribute to a pan-Sussex, regional and national picture of the status of GP websites and Out-Of-Hours messages.



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