

Getting the best out of your practice website and phoneline

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Key Information to be included within a GP Website

Overview

In 2021 Healthwatch Islington reviewed GP websites as they were becoming an increasingly important source of information for patients. Healthwatch re-visited this work in February 2023 when they undertook audits of all Islington GP Practice websites to see whether the improvements had made an impact. Additionally, C1 PCN commissioned an enhanced audit with residents who were not digitally confident.

The framework below sets out examples of best practice that ought to be included within websites, to improve patients access to their GP Practice and NHS services. This incorporates recommendations made by Healthwatch Islington:

Key Framework for GP Websites:

- 1. Home Page – Design and main features:** Pop-ups should not be included on websites, the advice from Healthwatch England is that pop-ups are not accessible.
- 2. Using technical or less common descriptions:** Technical terms should be fully clarified and include further information for example the use of “triage” should not be used without further explanation. Consider using more ‘patient friendly’ terms wherever possible.
- 3. News and Information always up to date:** Website content to be updated regularly, ideally weekly. Out of date information undermines people’s confidence.
- 4. Safe Surgeries:** All practices should be signed up to the Safe Surgeries initiative and websites ought to provide information about Safe Surgeries. Please see the following to sign up to this important initiative: <https://www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/safesurgeries/>
- 5. Getting appointments:** Websites should clearly list all types of appointments that are available. Healthwatch Islington suggest that practices may wish to adopt a question-and-answer format. For example: What help do you need? Who do you want to see? How do I make an appointment to see a doctor or nurse at the Practice?
- 6. Availability of face-to-face consultations:** Healthwatch Islington found that patients were often unclear whether face to face appointments could be requested. Websites ought to be clear about when patients can see a healthcare professional face-to-face. This needs to be clearly advertised with routes to book that are easy to follow. Using a question-and-answer format for example: Can I see you face to face?
- 7. Enhanced access / out of hours appointments:** It is important to use patient-focused language such as “What do to when the practice is closed” which is easier for patients to understand than Extended Access. Healthwatch Islington suggested that “Extended Access” can be a confusing phrase for patients.

8. **Role of Pharmacies:** Practice websites ought to refer to pharmacies and highlight the increasing role they play in offering information, help and advice. Including details on your website of how to find the nearest pharmacy is helpful to patients.
9. **Repeat Prescriptions:** Websites ought to cover details regarding repeat prescriptions with links explaining how to request this online. An accessible way to phrase this could be under the heading “How to do I get a repeat prescription?”
10. **e-Consult and AccuRx:** Websites need to include clear and simple information so that patients understand what e-Consult or AccuRx is and what to do if they can’t use it. Practices should continue to advertise the other ways that appointments can be made.
11. **Patient medical records:** Websites ought to include information on how a patient can access their medical records.
12. **Self- referrals:** To include clear information and working links regarding patient self-completion forms for conditions where self-referral is applicable.
13. **How to book an appointment for someone else:** To include clear information detailing how to book an appointment for someone who is cared for.
14. **Clearly visible search function:** Icons such as the magnifying glass for search functions and for translation aren’t always obvious to those who are less digitally literate. Each website should have a clear box that says “search.”
15. **Interpreting function:** To include clear information on the availability of interpreters and how to request an interpreter.
16. **Disability information:** To include whether there are adaptations available during appointments for example ramps, hearing loops, appointment indicating screens (for the Deaf / hard of hearing) or tannoys (for the Blind / visually impaired).

Additional Key Information to Include on Websites:
Key contact information
Email address/contact form
Clearly visible and up to date options to provide feedback or make a complaint
Translation button
Privacy policy
New patient information
New patient registrations details
Contact details – ensure they are up to date and also regularly updated
Ordering medication
Booking and cancelling appointments
Self-care and symptom checker including a link to the NHS website
NHS/111 services near you
NHS Number finder

Key Information to be Included in a Telephone Message

Context: Practice Phone Messages

The 2022 GP patient survey results show that telephone remains by far the most popular way to try to book an appointment. Over four in five patients (84.6%) called their practice by phone when they last tried to get an appointment.

Healthwatch Islington had heard anecdotally from patients that some practices had lengthy recorded messages on their phone lines. Consequently, they undertook a mystery shopping exercise in November and December 2022. The recommendations below incorporate suggestions made by Healthwatch Islington.

During 2023-24, all Islington practices will be moved to Cloud-based Telephony. Although this system is established in many practices, it is not being used optimally. The focus on Capacity and Access during 23-24 means that practices and PCNs should take this opportunity to review how they are using CBT and look at ways to optimise its use at both practice and PCN level to improve our patients experience of contacting their GP practice. CBT providers should be able to provide support for you to do this.

Key Recommendations:

- Messages should be regularly kept up-to-date, with information relating to things in the past (e.g. bank holidays) removed as soon as it is not relevant.
- More practices should use recorded messages to share information about services and access routes to help take pressure off general practice and promote patient choice. These messages can be played once the patient is in the queue to speak to reception.
- To support equality of access across Islington some standard messaging should be developed examples are included below.
- Messaging in general should be clear and concise
- A three-minute message before reaching the option menu is too long. Ideally the initial messages should be as short as possible.
- There should be a limited number of key messages prior to the patient joining the queue to speak to someone. Once they join the queue, then more messages can be relayed to the patient.
- The most important information should be shared at the beginning of the recording.
- Information should not be delivered too quickly so that patients can easily take in key information.
- COVID- the ongoing value of some of the Covid-specific information was questioned by Healthwatch Islington
- Patients should be told whether they are in the queue to speak to a member of staff or not and their number in the queue, so that they don't stay on the phone unnecessarily.
- Self-referral -callers should be informed of the possibility of self-referring to services such as physiotherapy, podiatry and ICOPE without having to wait for a GP appointment.

Structure and Content of Telephone Messages

With all practices moving to Cloud-based telephony, it should be possible to play a series of recorded messages to patients when they are in the queue to speak to reception (similar to when you are on hold to your bank, for example).

Clear patient focused language including phrases suggested by Healthwatch Islington are outlined below:

- **Face to face appointments:** “We are doing our best to see patients as soon as possible. Face to face appointments are available if you need one. Let us know if that is your preference.”
- A clear explanation of who **you may be seen by** should be included: “Our general practice team has expanded. You may be seen by a pharmacist, a physio or someone who can help with social needs as well as your GP or nurse.”
- Clear explanation about what patients can expect with increased **care navigation**: “You may be asked some additional questions now, to ensure that you are seen by the right person, first time.”
- What to do **when the practice is closed**: “If you call when the practice is closed you will automatically be put through to the out of hours service that offers evening or weekend appointments. This may be more convenient for you.”
- Information on appointments that are available in the evening and at weekends: “Did you know that you can ask to book an appointment in the evening, up to 8pm, or at the weekend if that is more convenient for you?”
- Some **“Did You Know”** information for patients and ways for practices to promote the good work that you are all doing:
 - “NHS.uk website and 111 online can be used to give you advice on how to treat minor conditions at home or at your local pharmacy.”
 - “Your GP practice is offering XX% more appointments to our patients than before the pandemic.”
 - “Last week / month Y% of appointments were missed. Missed appointments mean longer waiting times for you, so please let us know if you are unable to keep your appointment, so that we can offer it to someone else.”