

# Summary of analysis of Islington General Practice Websites January 2023



## **Healthwatch Islington**

Healthwatch Islington is an independent organisation led by volunteers from the local community. It is part of a national network of Healthwatch organisations that involve people of all ages and all sections of the community.

Healthwatch Islington gathers local people's views on the health and social care services that they use. We make sure those views are taken into account when decisions are taken on how services will look in the future, and how they can be improved.

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# Introduction

The first analysis of Islington general practice websites (30 in total) was undertaken in March 2021. At that time, considerable focus on the websites was placed on tackling the health problems emerging from Covid-19 and the issues around keeping patients and staff safe from infection. Given the changes to the scope and intensity of Covid-19, it has been possible for practices to amend and for most to upgrade their websites to help give patients better access to practice services and to wider NHS and community services targeted at better healthcare.

The summary of the analysis from January 2023 given here draws some general conclusions on the websites with examples of good practice, but also examples where improvements are needed to give patients the information and online links that they need to access practice and NHS services.

Geraldine Pettersson, Healthwatch Islington volunteer  
23rd February 2023

# Common website features

## Homepage design and main features

Almost all practice websites have a good homepage with Tabs to link to sites that patients would be most likely to need such as practice information with opening hours, appointments, health advice, services and clinics that the practice provides, repeat prescriptions and news. These are generally well illustrated and accessible, and using descriptive terms that are easily understandable.

One practice (New North Health Centre) deviates from the usual names for the homepage links, using instead: Front of House, Treatment Rooms, Admin Rooms, Neighbourhood, and News. The Front of House includes Waiting Room (opening hours) and Reception. Would everyone be familiar with these terms and what they imply?

A number of practices have a welcome message or message that we are here to help you at the start of the homepage or as a pop-up. For example, the Medical Centre (Holloway Road) has 'Welcome to the Medical Centre' with access to links for appointments and opening hours. St Peter's Street Medical Practice opens with 'A warm welcome to all our patients'. It is suggested that use of a friendly message sets a good tone for the website and can make patients feel they are welcome and valued.

On occasions, messages are used to convey to patients that the practice is still operating and providing its healthcare services. For example, the Northern Medical Centre has the message 'We are still here to care for you', because they are in temporary accommodation and wish to convey to patients that they are still there to provide the healthcare they need.

On some websites, good use is made of the question tab. For example, Archway Medical Centre has the question 'What do you want to do today?' And a list of links in response to this question including registration as a new patient, making an appointment, or repeat prescriptions.

One website (Ritchie Group Practice) has on its opening page - 'Welcome to the Practice' but then states 'we are no longer a walk-in service' without further information except to say patients need to wear a mask, if coming to the practice.

Most sites ask patients to give their views on the practice and the services it has provided, give a link to practice news or newsletter (although not all appear to be up to date), and give the Care Quality Commission's assessment and ranking.

## Using technical or less common descriptions

Although most websites avoid the use of technical terms to make their messages accessible to all patients, there are occasionally examples where some patients may not understand the terminology used. For example, Islington Central Medical Centre use the word 'triage' as a process that will be followed when patients ring to arrange an appointment, but offer no further explanation. Highbury Grange Practice website states all requests for same day appointments will be triaged, again without further explanation.

## **News and information is not always up to date**

It is suggested that when the website displays news or practice times of opening that is clearly out of date, this can undermine the confidence of patients. For example, the website for Islington Central Medical Centre opens with Seasons Greetings and information on Christmas closures. The Medical Centre (Holloway Road) asks patients to note that the surgery will be closed August 3rd and Monday 31st 2020. Within the News link, the Ritchie Group Practice has as its first item Beat the Heat and refers to the current Met Office warning to be heat aware.

Whilst accepting that practices have many pressing demands on their time, displaying out of date information (even for two months) can undermine patients' confidence in the website contents. Maybe just once a month, for a check to be made on the website just to ensure contents are accurate and current would be a good policy.

## **Language and translation**

Almost all practice websites have a prominent Tab for Language and a link for patients to select the language they need for translation. The translation service is provided by Google.

It would be good to assess the effectiveness of the translation tool by asking two or three patients for whom English is not their first or preferred language to provide their views on the translation service, including how effectively it is in translating technical and medical terms and phrases.

Many practice websites also inform patients that, should they require an interpreter to be provided for a consultation, they should make this request known when booking with a receptionist. Whether this facility is available when making appointments online needs to be explored.

## **Practice accessibility/ website accessibility**

Many practice websites identify that the practice premises are accessible, including for wheelchairs. One practice identifies that the facility has safe space for breastfeeding. Although recognising the challenges this may present, there is little that could help patients with sight or sound impairment. Work on websites for other disciplines has identified ways in which access for those with sight or sound impairment can be improved, and this could be explored – including with voluntary groups that provide support for these patients.

## **Medical Records**

A common feature on most practice websites is to include information on how to access the patient's medical records.

## Safe Surgeries

Only two practice websites specifically refer to Safe Surgeries – one (Ritchie Group Practice) has the logo with the statement we are a safe surgery. A second (Goodinge Practice) expressed its pride in being a Safe Surgery stating 'Proud to be a Safe Surgery' and helpfully provides detailed information about what this means.

It may be that Practices are not fully aware of this initiative and the importance of giving it prominence on the website. It would help to provide information to the Practices that stress the importance of the initiative for what are often marginalised communities and groups.

There are good examples, however, where the objectives of Safe Surgeries are being promoted as a separate initiative. One practice (Northern Medical Centre) includes: Welcome to NHS for migrants – this is said to be a new resource that can help refugees and asylum seekers navigate NHS services. Another practice (The Medical Centre, Holloway Road) refers to the Refuge Therapy Centre with a link to the centre's website for more information. The Ritchie Group Practice says that it welcomes patients from the LGBTQ+ communities with links to other relevant websites.

# Specific website features

## Accessing information and services online

In the first analysis of the practice websites in 2021, eConsult was very prominent as an online tool and widely recommended as a means of accessing information and NHS and practice services. From this current analysis, eConsult is no longer the tool of choice as priority and coverage is now given to Patient Access and the NHS App.

In contrast to the past approach of recommending eConsult for all contacts, some practice websites (for example River Group Practice and Elizabeth Avenue Group Practice) give a list of what they consider eConsult is best used for and states that we feel other clinical issues are often best dealt with using the appropriate appointment found on the appointments page. Some practice websites (such as the Ritchie Group Practice) state that eConsult is only available for limited hours: currently it is only available Monday to Friday from 8am to 9am and do not use in emergencies.

There are some practice websites that have adopted a clear and accessible format for using eConsult. For example, the Barnsbury Medical Practice states 'our online appointments booking service is called eConsult which helps us to provide you with the most appropriate appointment. Follow the link to complete the process and then phone us...if you do not have a smart phone or online access you are welcome to continue on the telephone. You will always be offered a GP appointment if needed'.

Although Patient Access and the NHS App may well be more accessible and effective for online information and services, there is a concern from this analysis, that people who have registered for eConsult and used it in the past may now be uncertain about its role and relevance. Some practices include the standard eConsult Tab on their homepage, but do not refer to it at all in the rest of the website and now refer almost exclusively to Patient Access. It would help to have some clarity about the role and application of the different ways of accessing information and services covering eConsult, Patient Access, NHS App, and others.

As an example of good format and content using their own online access tools, Archway Medical Centre on the homepage states 'no more waiting weeks to see your GP, tackling busy reception phone lines, or time off work... join the thousands of patients getting doctors notes, repeat contraception, referral letters and health advice all within a few hours online'. On the Tab, 'To book an Appointment', the emphasis is very much on how online appointments can provide most of what you need with the additions of written and telephone consultations. The website states that: 'GP online is a free online consultation service run by an NHS practice. That means if you register with us, you'll get all the usual services you'd normally get from your GP and more. Speak with a doctor or nurse at a time that suits you via video chat or phone call. Get written clinical advice, prescriptions, in-person appointments and more'. Statements like this are likely to give patients unaware of the advantages of online contact to have the confidence to use this approach.

## Getting Appointments

Some of the most important and most used features on the practice websites are those relevant to appointments. These features for seeking and obtaining an appointment with a range of medical staff (including Doctor, Nurse, Healthcare Assistant) are also some of the most complex, and it is not always easy to understand how to negotiate the website tools to obtain the help that a patient needs.

There are some good examples that help a patient obtain the appointment they need, either online or importantly by making telephone contact with a receptionist. Amwell Group Practice within the tab 'booking an appointment' lists all types of appointment that are available, including online, face to face and eConsult. The Family Practice is one of a number that refers to the length of a consultation with a doctor lasting 10 minutes in total, and advises patients to request a duplicate timeslot if they think a longer consultation will be necessary. As another example, Junction Medical Practice provides a good description of the operation of the appointment system and advises that appointments are only 10 minutes in length and if a patient needs longer need, two should be booked.

Mildmay Medical Practice explains well and clearly how to make an appointment online or by telephone, and that these can be booked up to two weeks in advance. As with most practices, the time allocated for healthcare staff, especially doctors and nurses, also allows for emergency or urgent appointments to be made on the same day as the request. The New North Health Centre refers to this as Advanced Access with patients able to request an appointment on the same day or next working day.

Some practices seek to avoid what is seen as 'unfair' if a patient comes to the surgery to book an appointment. For example the Beaumont Practice website states coming to the practice to book an appointment is unfair to other patients and therefore we will not book an appointment if you walk in.

It is noted that use of a question and answer format could be useful for patients wanting to make an appointment. 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?

## Availability of face-to-face consultations

Although there are some good examples, it is not always possible for patients to easily establish when they can see a healthcare professional face-to-face. The impact of the pandemic meant that increasingly, priority and focus for providing information and health advice was online. Limits on the availability and time of healthcare staff (especially doctors and nurses) has meant that practices have to rely heavily on meeting patient needs through online consultations. This will undoubtedly continue into the future. However, it is also important for many patients that the availability of face-to-face appointments is maintained, and practice websites should ensure that such appointments are clearly advertised with easily followed routes to book.



It is suggested that the use of a question and answer format would again be helpful. The Archway Medical Centre on appointments has a website question – Can I see you face to face?, and explains how a patient can book a face to face appointment although this may take longer to arrange than other appointments.

We noted in our workshops for digital learners covering practices from the central area of Islington that the question and answer format really helped people find the information they were looking for.

### **Enhanced access/ out of hours appointments**

An important addition to the range of appointments for patients are those that are available out of hours (when the practice is closed) and also known as Enhanced Access. There are many good examples from the websites of practices making this service known and available to their patients. For example, Andover Medical Practice clearly refers to Extended Access through I:HUB. It gives the times available in the evenings and at weekends, and lists the three Practices in Islington where access is provided. It explains how to make an appointment by telephone and the link to I:HUB. Importantly, it explains that the need to book such an appointment does not have to be for emergency or urgent advice or treatment but for routine reasons.

In a similar format, Northern Medical Centre refers to evening and weekend appointments that are available at the practice and also has links to I:HUB delivered by Islington GPs at three practices. Importantly, again this states that appointments do not have to be urgent.

Some Practice websites refer to I:HUB or Extended Access without explaining fully what this provides. For example, Roman Way Medical Centre states that Outside Working Hours there is I:HUB access between 6.30pm and 8pm but with no clear explanation of its role for routine appointments. Under the tab 'When we are closed', information is provided on NHS 111 and 999 but no reference is made to I:HUB.

City Road Medical Centre recommends when the surgery is closed to call NHS 111 or 999 in an emergency. It states that the out of hours service is generally very busy, but does not refer specifically here to the 'extended hours' access. It does, however, provide detailed information about Islington GP Federation and the services provided including I:HUB for evenings and weekends appointments.

The website for St John's Way Medical Centre states that when we are closed, out of hours emergencies are covered by LCW, a service commissioned by NHS Islington and NHS111. It states further that LCW/NHS111 will deal with emergency problems but not life threatening ones and to telephone the practice number, even if closed, to make contact.

For such an important patient-orientated service, it is concerning that it is not referred to or included in the websites of some practices. For example, River Group Practice makes no reference to Extended Hours or I:HUB and recommends when the practice is

closed to speak to NHS 111 or the out of hours service provided for emergency treatment. We noted in our workshops for digital learners covering practices from the central area of Islington that these services were easier to find when listed under headers that used more patient-focused language such as 'What to do when the practice is closed'.

## **Repeat Prescriptions**

All the practice websites cover the service of providing repeat prescriptions with links showing how to do this online. A good example is St Peter's Street Medical Practice that has the ways to obtain a repeat prescription in response to one of the questions 'How do I?' and lists links for the NHS App, Patient Access and the Electronic Prescribing Service. Ordering by telephone is not available for practices for safety reasons. Some practices allow patients to hand over their repeat prescription into a designated box at reception. Most practices include information on the fees for prescriptions and exemptions.

## **Vaccines**

During the peak of the pandemic, most websites covered access to Covid-19 vaccines in detail and subsequently provided information on qualifying for and obtaining boosters. Vaccines are now a much less prominent feature on all the practice websites with some referring to Covid-19, and others for example to Flu and Monkeypox vaccines and Polio vaccines for children.

## **Self-referral to NHS services**

This is another important service for patients and needs to be well promoted on practice websites with clear information about what it covers and how to access, and appropriate links to providers. Many practices also include patient self-completion forms for the different conditions relevant for self-referral.

River Group Practice includes self-referral on the homepage and explains clearly what the service can provide and how to access. The website states: Many services in Islington offer self-referral which may allow you to bypass seeing a GP completely – and has links to NHS services covering all those within the scheme including those for musculoskeletal conditions and maternity. Another example where the service is well presented is the Miller Group Practice where a tab on the homepage explains that there are a number of services to which you can self-refer and includes online forms to make the referral to the relevant services.

As with the Enhanced Access service it is worrying that some practices do not have clear and easily understandable information on self-referral. For example, City Road Medical Centre there is little information about self-referral available on the website, within 'Clinics we Offer' it refers to podiatry and counselling to which you can be referred to by a doctor or nurse. For physiotherapy, however, it says that you can self-refer to the Whittington. St John's Way Medical Centre's website provides detailed information about the First Contact Practitioners Service, and refers to the physiotherapy service that you can access directly without a GP referral. As another example, Archway Medical Centre does not identify self-referral on the website, but does say that the practice

can refer to an NHS or private specialist service and make a patient appointment. This includes for example mental health specialist services, but it is the practice that will refer. The Medical Centre (Holloway Road) has good information listed under Clinics and Services that includes self-referral and, for example, refers and has links to iCope as the Camden and Islington Psychological Therapies Service.

### **Self-referral to community and voluntary sector services**

The part of the website providing information on Self-Referral is also well-used by some Practices to widen the scope of providers to include those in the voluntary and community sector linked to conditions. There are some good examples from the analysis. New North Health Centre has a Neighbourhood tab on the homepage and this gives information the Peer Travel Buddy Scheme with a link to help those with mental health issues who can self-refer. It refers to Silver Surfers that are working with Age UK to help older patients to access services online with a link. It also refers to Playground with services available for younger patients and parents. There is also a Carers UK link. As another example, the River Group Practice refers to community groups such as the Hand in Hand service for volunteer peer travel services, groups providing welfare and advice for those experiencing domestic violence, and those requiring help with weight management.

The Medical Centre (Holloway Road) website refers to Samira Project that provides support for women and girls experiencing domestic violence. It also refers to a number of six week self-management courses for patients (Expert Patients Programme) including Diabetes Self-Management Courses. Other courses can help patients to better cope with health conditions such as arthritis, depression, and other long term health conditions. It refers to New Beginnings for a mental health course, and courses to cope with drinking/drugs. It lists the courses in Jan/Feb 2023 and how to book. The website for the Ritchie Group Practice has links for self-referral to women's health, domestic violence, help for carers, help with money etc, mental health issues. As in the number of other websites, information and a link is provided to We are Islington.

### **Pharmacies, role for advice and help**

Using pharmacies (Pharmacy First) for health information and advice is a relatively new initiative that all websites should publicise to their patients. It has the advantage of providing almost immediate and easily accessible help for patients on many minor conditions and thus reduces the pressure on GP practices. However, not all practices make reference to pharmacies on their websites or highlight its increasing role in offering information, advice and help.

As a good example, the Miller Practice has a Self-Help tab on the website and this includes self-referral to local pharmacies (Pharmacy First). There is also a link to more detailed information about how your pharmacy can help. The website for the Medical Centre (Holloway Road) explains that your local pharmacist can give you expert advice about over the counter medicines and on a lot of common conditions. Some websites list local pharmacies and others include a link to a national database with contact details.



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