



Giving GP Websites a Check-up

How easy is it to find information?



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We are the independent champion for people who use health and social care services in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

Our job is to make sure that those who run local health and care services understand and act on what really matters to people.

We listen to what people like about services and what could be improved. And focus on ensuring that people's worries and concerns about current services are addressed.

We work to get services right for the future.

Thank you

We would like to thank all the Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and Healthwatch Peterborough volunteers who took part in this audit.

Introduction

GP websites are a key communication tool between a GP practice and their patients. They also play a wider role in linking patients to the services and support in their community.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, patients were advised not to visit GP surgeries due to social distancing and lockdown.

Healthwatch wanted to find out how easy it was to find current information on surgery websites about how to access GP services and keep safe and well during the pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic has prompted many health and care service changes for people in our area. And with lockdown pushing more services online, website accessibility and usability has become a priority.

Our own Covid-19 survey research¹ shows that many people have been able to get information to stay safe and well during the crisis.

However, via the same survey and through other evidence, Healthwatch remains concerned that some groups continue to face barriers to good quality, current information because of health inequalities. These may stem from physical health problems, sensory loss, learning disability, lower literacy levels or access to technology - and the right digital skills to use it.

We carried out a website audit of GP surgeries throughout Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and checked how easy it was to find key information that was up to date, clear and easy to understand.

Our audit forms part of a regional project working with other Healthwatch in the East of England. It is based on a model developed by Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire looking at GP websites and concerned about information for patients using cancer care services (report linked in Appendix).

¹ Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and Healthwatch Peterborough Covid-19 survey 2020 findings <https://www.healthwatchcambridgeshire.co.uk/coronavirus-yourviews>

What we did

There are 86 member practices in the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Clinical Commissioning Group which cover all GP practices in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, as well as two practices in North Hertfordshire (Royston and Melbourn) and two in Northamptonshire (Oundle and Wansford).

Our Healthwatch audited 98 surgery websites. The number of practice websites varies from the number of practices stated above. This is because practice business models change and so, therefore, does their online presence.

Volunteers assessed between one and 12 sites each. Each site was assessed once. Nine of these individuals assessed their 'home' GP website.

The Healthwatch volunteers are not digital experts and represented members of the public in that some have more experience of using and searching for online information than others.

They aimed to find information that a patient might need without having to make a telephone call to the practice.

The work was carried out between 24 June - 12 July 2020.

The volunteers navigated their way around websites and answered yes or no to a set of questions.

These included: checking for a link to the Government's Covid-19 website; looking for information about changes in cancer care; finding good examples of accessibility; finding out how easy it was to make appointments and complaints; and searching for information about practices' Patient Participation Groups.

They also used a comments box to expand on what they found.

Context

We acknowledge that the priority for GP practices, like the whole of our NHS, has been doing everything they can to respond to the Covid-19 threat. Providing up to date and accurate information during the pandemic is an essential part of this effort.

We understand that some practices manage website content themselves while others have external professional support from specialist GP website businesses.

The information we discovered is a snapshot of information held on sites during the given time period.

We recognise that some practices may have been updating their sites during our audit and that changes have been made since our visits, in order to meet accessibility standard regulations for public sector organisations¹.

All GP websites must comply with these by 23 September 2020. The regulations were introduced in 2018 and most older GP websites have had two years to comply.

Under the rules, practices must also publish - and regularly review - an accessibility statement on the level of accessibility across the site. And, if there are barriers, how website visitors can access information in other ways and formats. The statement will also enable users to contact the website owner if they identify problems.

1 The Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No.2) Accessibility Regulations 2018'. They are now law in the UK and implement the EU Directive on the accessibility of public sector websites and mobile applications.



Findings

Key findings summary

From the data collected, it is clear there is a big difference in the quality of GP websites. Although the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted normal working practices and care, at the time of our audit, websites have obviously not been a priority for some surgeries for some time.

- ⇒ Half of GP websites did not have the latest Covid-19 guidance for the public.
- ⇒ Just 22 out of 98 websites had links to information about changes to cancer services during the pandemic.
- ⇒ It was difficult to find information about advocacy support for making a complaint.
- ⇒ 72 sites had links to self-care information but some links did not work.
- ⇒ Less than half had information about the practices' Patient Participation Groups.
- ⇒ Two out of three sites did not have good examples of accessible information for patients with sensory loss or learning disabilities.
- ⇒ The volunteers said they liked sites containing relevant content presented in a straightforward way and highlighted examples of them.

Detailed findings

This section follows the questions that volunteers used for the audit, using yes/no choices, and incorporating some free text comments.

Is there evidence of when the website was last updated?

Updated information other than Covid-19 varied from website to website. The audit showed 51 (52%) did have up to date information, however 47 (48%) did not.

Some websites had Covid-19 information in small font size which was hard to read and not easily noticed.

Does the Covid-19 “pop-up” window show the latest guidance around the new loss of taste or smell symptom?

A pop-up is a small “window” of information that appears over the top of a webpage when someone visits the site.

Our audit showed that 49 websites (half) had the most recent pop-up - dated 15/6/2020 - featuring the latest guidance highlighting the newly-added coronavirus symptom of loss of taste or smell.

We found that 49 websites did not have the latest guidance.

The original pop-up about Covid-19, provided by Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) did not contain a date, which made it difficult for people to know how recent the information was.

Our volunteers said ...

“The Covid-19 pop-up irritatingly kept popping up when it was not wanted, making it difficult to access other pages.”

“Not as a “pop-up” but there was a lot of information on dedicated pages.”

Does the website include a link to the Government's Covid-19 website?

We found 76 websites had a prominent link. However, it was difficult to find on 22 sites.

A volunteer of the audit said:

“You have to scroll almost to the bottom of this page for the heading information about coronavirus.”

Does the website contain any information/advice about changes in cancer care during Covid-19?

Because of the pandemic, planned treatments, including cancer surgery, were cancelled or postponed due to reduction of access at intensive care units (ICU) and staffing capacity.

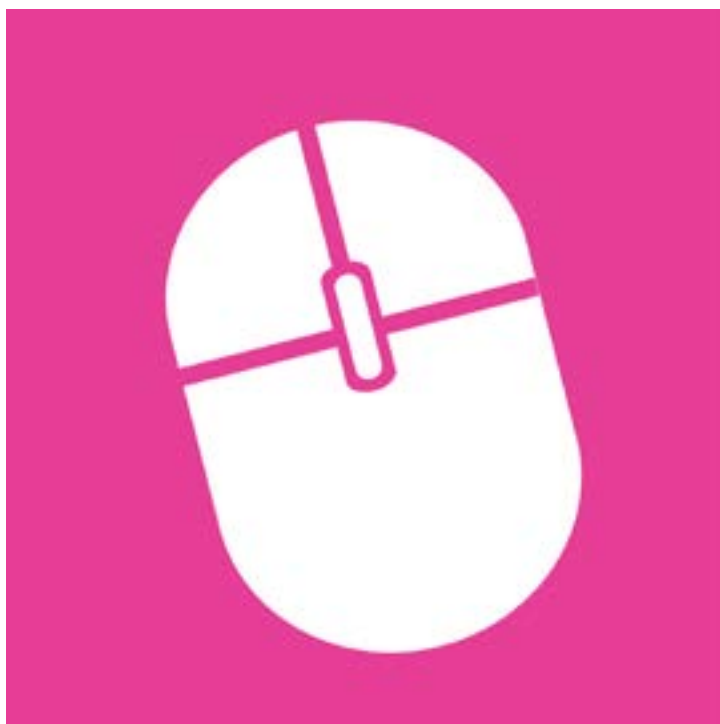
We wanted to investigate the extent of current information and advice provided on local GP surgery websites for cancer patients.

Not all cancer patients were asked to shield¹, therefore information was key to support these patients and their carers.

Although most sites had links to cancer services on self-care pages, only 22 provided information about cancer care during the pandemic.

Some volunteers had to click through several pages to find information about support sites. This would be difficult for patients with limited experience of using websites or technology.

¹ https://www.macmillan.org.uk/coronavirus/cancer-and-shielding#who_is_considered_extremely_vulnerable



Our volunteers said ...

“Fairly easy to find, used three mouse clicks via the self-care conditions list. Macmillan Covid-19 detailed information and advice about care/changes/how to find out more.”

“I was unable to find any reference to cancer care/changes due to Covid, no link to Macmillan either. I clicked at least four weblinks and checked Facebook.”



Was it easy to find out how to make an appointment?

Covid-19 social distancing restrictions have limited “face to face” contact and led to a rapid increase in the use of remote consultations. This is a significant shift in the way GP services are being provided.

Different ways to consult with health professionals – such as via phone, video and email – are now on offer.

Our audit showed 83 out of the 98 sites had information a patient would need to understand how to make an appointment.

We liked ...

- Thistlemoor GPs in Peterborough made a video which clearly explained the reason for the changes and how to make contact.
- Trumpington Street Medical Practice in Cambridge also had a clear page that explained the different ways to consult with a GP, contact admin or the pharmacy.

Our volunteers said...

“Appointments and home visits can be accessed direct from the front page of the website. However, online appoints can only be booked after registering for this service through the Practice reception desk.”

“The link to appointments stated on-line suspended – use the telephone to contact the surgery. I do not have a clue how appointments are offered.”

“Receptionist or GP link with a one-hour telephone or video response available.”

Does the website have links to self-care and support organisations for health and wellbeing?

From local people's feedback last year on the NHS Long Term Plan¹, Healthwatch has ample evidence that the public want to be able to look after their own health and need better information to make choices and decisions.

Providing links to services and support available in local communities can be a way to guide patients to the right service, encourage self-care and reduce health inequalities².

We found nearly three out of four (75%) of the websites we audited had links to self-care to help people manage their health and wellbeing.

Generally, these were found at the bottom of a webpage (sometimes involving scrolling down to the "footer panel" right at the bottom). Although not all links were checked, a number were found to be not working.

Some had not changed the title of the link although the organisation's name had changed - for example, the Royal National Institute for the Deaf is now Action on Hearing Loss.

1 Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and Healthwatch Peterborough What Would You Do? Report, July 2019 (see Appendix)

2 Health inequalities article from independent charitable organisation King's Fund which works to improve health and care in England

<https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/what-are-health-inequalities>



Our volunteers said...

“The search facility under Health Information leaflets didn't work.

“There is a link to Symptom Checker - this had generic information with lots of side-bar advertising.”

“Excellent up-front window into self-care and more, the format is well organised and easy to follow, would make a good template for others to follow.”

Is there a good example of accessible information for patients who have sensory loss or learning disabilities?

One in three websites were found to have some information that was a good example of accessible information.

Volunteers found three website companies managing several surgery websites. One referred to carrying out an accessibility audit on their GP sites, ready for the compliance deadline on accessibility standard regulations for public sector organisations on 23 September 2020.

Overall, it was disappointing to find it difficult to locate the links to accessible information - often they were found at the bottom of a page in very small print.

We liked ...

East Barnwell Health Centre in Cambridge had a widget (see Appendix) prominently on the home page enabling users with sensory loss and disabilities to access information in different ways.

This included navigating by keyboard instead of mouse, contrast, and bigger text.

At the time of the audit, it was the only site to have this feature.



Our volunteers said...

“Commendably there is extensive accessibility information for patients with sight and hearing loss, albeit learning disabilities feature elsewhere via the top-level index. However, the link into the sight loss element information is still in normal font size.”

“On demand basic sign language access for deaf patients.”

“Is not fully set up for patients with sensory loss nor at all for those with learning disabilities. For example, if one is unable to access the website a different format can be requested such as PDF but it is stated that “we’ll consider your request and get back to you in 28 days.”

Sites run by My Surgery Website said visitors should be able to:

- ⇒ Zoom in up to 200% without the text spilling off the screen.
- ⇒ Navigate most of the website using speech recognition software.
- ⇒ Listen to most of the website using a screen reader (including the most recent versions of JAWS, NVDA and VoiceOver).
- ⇒ Use the website with Browsealoud.

They also said they had made the website text as simple as possible to understand.

And that "AbilityNet has advice on making your device easier to use if you have a disability".

Was it easy to find out how to make a complaint?

Patients who use GP websites should be able to access information about making a complaint and find out what documents they need to use.

Our audit volunteers found relevant information on 77 websites. However, volunteers said this took time to find as details were often not in an obvious location.

Some websites asked patients to start the complaint process with a phone call, others with an email, and some by downloading a form. One volunteer described “very long-winded” processes.

Patients unfamiliar with the complaint process could struggle to find appropriate information. Rarely were the full complaints procedures listed (see Appendix for complaints guidance).

Some practices mentioned independent NHS complaints advocacy but not all had the correct local provider listed.

Our volunteers said...

“The complaints policy which was found in general information noted it was updated in 2015 and was to be reviewed 2016.”

“I could not find a link from the home page or any other page on the website.”

“Once I found the page it was easy to use - but the complaints page was stark and intimidating. It would be better if there was an opportunity to discuss any complaint informally before putting the complaint in writing. Some complaints are minor and easily resolved.”

“Details of how to contact the practice manager with email and phone contact information. Also, a detailed page explaining procedure/timescale and policy etc.”



We liked ...

New Queen Street (Whittlesey) and Stanground surgeries in Peterborough have a combined website with a “How do I?” section on the home page menu bar. Images included a feedback icon to encourage patients to give their views.

There was also a section about “how to register a complaint”, together with a “what we will do” and a list of other organisations who could help.





Does the website contain current Patient Participation Group (PPG) information?

Less than half the websites had up to date information about their PPG.

PPGs are groups of patients, carers and GP practice staff who meet to discuss practice issues and use patients' experiences to help improve services for everyone on its list.

Since April 2015 it has been a contractual requirement of NHS England for all GP practices to have a PPG and to make reasonable efforts for this to be representative of the practice population.

Our audit showed:

- ⇒ Most sites did not have information explaining what a PPG group is or what it can achieve for both the patient and the surgery.
- ⇒ Most information found was out of date with some agendas and a newsletter dated 2013-14.
- ⇒ One website stating that “all patients technically are members of PPG”. However, it did not follow up the statement with what this means.
- ⇒ Some links to information about PPGs did not work.

Our volunteers said ...

“The information was not dated and very general. Surveys from PPG activity are very old, the most recent being from 2013 to 2014.”

“Links to PPG reports didn't seem to work.”

“There appears to be a strong PPG with evidence in minutes from meetings since its inception. One meeting was missed in April due to the pandemic but has picked up again with a 'Zoom' meeting in June 2020 (minutes from that posted on-line).”

Is there information about Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and Healthwatch Peterborough?

Healthwatch is the independent champion for people using health and care services in our area and our role is to listen to people's experiences and share the feedback with local NHS and care providers to improve services for all.

We also provide an information service about health and care services.

Our audit showed 81 websites (out of 98) did not have information about our Healthwatch.

One which did have a link took our volunteer to Healthwatch Staffordshire which would not be local or relevant.



Is there a web host/web master provider?

Two thirds used an external company to run and manage or maintain their sites.

Recommendations

Having considered the findings of the audit, we have identified these as the key areas for improvement.

Consistency

It would be helpful if websites comply with a basic standard of presentation and content - which could provide consistency of key information for patients and carers. Our Healthwatch will explore key information through work with volunteers and patients. (See our next steps on p19.)

Accurate, up to date and easy to understand information

While we understand that improving websites would not take priority during a health pandemic, making sure that patients have up to date information about Covid-19 is vital.

Information should be written clearly and in a way that is easy for everybody to understand.

Although we did not audit websites' compatibility for hand-held devices (such as smartphones and tablets), websites should be mobile-friendly and modified for viewing on smaller screens.

In 2018, among all adults, 78% used mobile phones or smartphones to access the internet¹.

We will review if local GP websites are designed for different devices when we revisit a sample of sites next year.

¹ Office for National Statistics Internet access - households and individuals, Great Britain: 2018 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/bulletins/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividuals/2018>

Ease of making an appointment

We recommend a clear link to contact information on all pages to make it easy for people to make an appointment or make an enquiry.

Videos can be easier to understand for some people, especially where they are also subtitled.

For other people, a different approach may work better, as it is important that people are able to access this information in a way that works for them.

Links to self-care

Links to other healthcare and community services should work and be up to date.

Improving accessibility

Website information – and the way it's presented – should be clear and easy to read and understand. This helps people make informed decisions about their own care or treatment.

Up to date photographs of key staff can be useful for people with learning disabilities as this may help ease concerns around meeting new people.

All GP websites should comply with accessibility standards for public sector organisations by 23 September 2020.

Information about making a complaint

We would like GP websites to offer clear, visible and concise information to make it easy for patients to understand how to raise their concerns, leave feedback and support them in making a complaint should they need to.

We recommend linking to the full information of where to send complaints – including NHS England, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, and Voiceability the local NHS complaints advocacy provider for people living in Cambridgeshire or Peterborough.

Improving PPG information and representation

Our Healthwatch would like to see more active PPGs across our area. And would encourage GP websites to:

- ⇒ Ensure that PPG information is up to date.
- ⇒ Encourage the PPG to send information to a designated person at the surgery so that it can be updated on the website.
- ⇒ Encourage new members by explaining what the group is about and its aims.
- ⇒ With current uncertainty and social distancing measures, PPGs could introduce virtual “Zoom” or “Teams” meetings and encourage a more diverse range of patients to get involved.

Adding a Healthwatch link

We would ask local practices to consider adding contact details and a link to Healthwatch Cambridgeshire or Healthwatch Peterborough with a summary of what we do and how we can help patients and carers find information about local health and care services.



Our next steps

We will:

1. Offer GP surgeries across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough the opportunity to discuss their individual audit and our recommendations to make improvements.
2. Raise the issue of GP website quality regionally with our East of England Healthwatch network and nationally with Healthwatch England.
3. Seek to co-produce a checklist of essential information for patients with our volunteers.
4. Encourage local people in our area to report back to us on their experiences of GP websites.
5. Undertake a sample review of GP websites in six months' time (spring 2021) to look at what has changed.
6. Share the report with our Local Medical Committee, which represents GPs and practices across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and work with them to raise awareness of the importance of accessible online information.
7. Discuss the report findings with Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Clinical Commissioning Group, which plans, buys, and monitors health services in our area.
8. Contribute the audit findings and seek to influence improvement at a regional level through our Healthwatch partners.
9. Send the report to Healthwatch England to inform the national picture.
10. Track the difference this work has made and report this to our Board as part of a continuing public discussion.

Appendix

Our Healthwatch PPG toolkit

- ⇒ <https://www.healthwatchcambridgeshire.co.uk/report/2018-03-15/how-get-patients-involved-your-patient-participation-group>
- ⇒ <https://www.healthwatchpeterborough.co.uk/report/2018-03-15/how-get-patients-involved-your-patient-participation-group>

USERWAY Accessibility widget used by East Barnwell Health Centre

- ⇒ <https://userway.org/>

Further reading

- ⇒ Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire GP website survey report (May 2020)
<https://healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk/publications/general-reports#single/0>
- ⇒ Healthwatch Lewisham GP website survey report about making complaints (March 2019) <https://www.healthwatchlewisham.co.uk/news/improving-complaints-information-in-lewisham/>
- ⇒ Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and Healthwatch Peterborough report What Would You Do? <https://www.healthwatchcambridgeshire.co.uk/report/2019-07-25/how-people-would-spend-extra-nhs-cash-cambridgeshire>
- ⇒ NHS complaints procedure
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-nhs-constitution-for-england/how-do-i-give-feedback-or-make-a-complaint-about-an-nhs-service>

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