

Giving GP websites a check-up

Project update

Project briefing from Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and Healthwatch Peterborough

Introduction

This report is an update on our 2020 ‘Giving GP websites a Check-up’¹ project where we audited all 98 GP websites in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Our Community Listener volunteers checked how easy it was to find key information that was up to date, clear and easy to understand. The aim was to find information that a patient might need without having to make a telephone call to the practice.

The report identified a number of issues, including:

- Half did not have the latest Covid 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 when 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.

¹ (Healthwatch Cambridgeshire, 2020) **Giving GP Websites a check-up**

<https://www.healthwatchcambridgeshire.co.uk/report/2020-09-16/giving-gp-websites-check>

And (Healthwatch Peterborough, 2020) **Giving GP Websites a check-up**

<https://www.healthwatchpeterborough.co.uk/report/2020-09-16/giving-gp-websites-check>

The report made recommendations to improve information and accessibility on the websites. We also offered individual GP services the opportunity for one-to-one feedback on their sites from our volunteers.

The following surgeries took up the offer of a feedback session about their websites and asked for ideas on how to make improvements.

- South Fenland group practice, where one website covers six surgeries
- Cambridge City Medical Practice
- The Spinney Surgery
- Woodlands Surgery

Supporting practices to improve their websites

We followed up the report by co-producing an ‘Essential guide to GP websites’² with our volunteers. This was published in December 2020 and shared with surgeries to help make their sites more patient-friendly.

The checklist urged GPs to keep online information up to date, accurate and easy to find. It highlighted essential information to include such as:

- How to book appointments
- Opening hours for the surgery/pharmacy
- Surgery phone number and address
- A staff who's who with photos
- How to feedback about surgery services
- How to make a complaint
- Accessibility help for people who have a disability or sensory impairment so that they can also access and understand the information on the website.

² (Healthwatch Cambridgeshire, 2020) **Making GP websites clearer for patients**
<https://www.healthwatchcambridgeshire.co.uk/news/2020-12-07/making-gp-websites-clearer-patients>

And (Healthwatch Peterborough, 2020) **Making GP websites clearer for patients**
<https://www.healthwatchpeterborough.co.uk/report/2020-09-16/giving-gp-websites-check>

Reviewing progress

In May and June 2021, we worked on resampling 23 websites covering a total of 44 practices. We wanted to find if changes had been made in line with the recommendations from our original 'Giving GP websites a Check-up' report.

Our volunteers audited the sites using a checklist. They also looked at how well websites worked on a mobile phone, which was not covered as part of the initial audit.

What we found on our return visits:

- Less than two thirds had the latest Covid information
- Only 14.2% of Covid-19 pop up information was dated
- One in five had links to cancer services
- Three in five had self-care links, with no broken links identified
- 96% of our volunteers said it was easy to find out how to make a phone appointment; however, finding out about face-to-face appointments was not so easy.
- Accessibility – 14 volunteers said no good examples were found. Seven volunteers said they found good examples of accessibility.
- Complaints – nearly three out of four (74%) of our volunteers could find how to complain; however, this is sometimes buried within other pages. Information about the complaints system was not easy to understand.
- Half the websites had information about Patient Participation Groups; however, most was out of date and did not explain what PPGs do.
- 16 sites did not mention Healthwatch Cambridgeshire or Healthwatch Peterborough.

Improvements on some sites

In some cases, website layout had improved, allowing users to navigate more easily to different areas. However, some key information remained hidden or difficult to understand.

Two practice partnerships had joined together to fund a shared website which was better to navigate. This has improved accessibility and will be helpful to patients.

Viewing websites on a mobile device

Although not part of the initial report findings, we also checked compatibility for handheld devices, using an iPhone. Lots of people use smartphones, as well as computers, to browse the internet and find information online. In 2018, research from the Office of National Statistics showed that 78% people used smart phones to access the internet.³

We found the screen layout on mobile devices was often good, but it was not easy to use for patients with additional needs.

Accessible design

All public sector websites, including those of GP surgeries, were required to comply with accessibility standard regulations as of 23 September 2020⁴.

However, less than one in three volunteers said that there were good examples of accessibility.

“The font size on website is small. I could not see how to enlarge. Any link for accessibility would have meant me visiting other sites to look at how to change the info etc.”

- Volunteer feedback

Since our first audit, some websites now have an overlay or “widget” which can be used to make some changes to improve accessibility.

“Icon visible through website. Very good information”

- Volunteer feedback

We asked for feedback from people who have lived experiences of additional needs and it was found the logo on the overlay/widget is not one a user would recognise to make adaptations.

³ Office for National Statistics Internet access - households and individuals, Great Britain: 2018
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/bulletins/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividuals/2018>

⁴ (Gov.uk, 2021) Understanding accessibility requirements for public sector bodies
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/accessibility-requirements-for-public-sector-websites-and-apps>

“Good clear text and spacing. Easy to navigate. Difficult to recognise the “man” icon was to help adapt text, read aloud etc.”

- Volunteer feedback

Website intelligence company, Silktide, says that overlays are not best practice in developing an accessible site as they are not compatible with mobile devices and only around 20-30% of accessibility issues can be addressed⁵.

Up to date information?

Fewer than two out of three sites had the latest Covid information and only 14% of pop-up information was dated.

“The pop-up Covid update alert faded out after about 10 seconds which is less than practical time to scroll read with other info on the alert such social prescribers, appointments, prescriptions, sick notes, Covid symptoms and mental health services.”

- Volunteer feedback

How easy is it to make an appointment?

Although most people found it easy to find out how to make appointments by telephone, they did not find it as easy to find out about face to face appointments.

“Top of page in the black bar 3 item reads ‘Appointments’. However, this does not show the telephone number. This can be found under contact details, but the first appearing is [name of other surgery] it is necessary to click on the surgery “box” to get to [name of my surgery].”

- Volunteer feedback

One volunteer told us how their practice had information about phone triage and video consultations.

“Via a ‘how do I’ link. Takes to a new page explaining phone triage first. Video consultations if appropriate.”

- Volunteer feedback

⁵ (Waters, S, 2021) **Accessibility overlays don’t work**, Silktide -

<https://silktide.com/blog/accessibility-overlays-dont-work/> [Accessed 28/10/2021]

Generally, it was easy to find information about making an appointment by phone. Booking an on-line appointment was clearly marked and took some of our volunteers off to another site “Systmonline” which was difficult to access if you’re not already registered.

Making a complaint

Three out of four people were able to find out how to raise a concern about their care or make a complaint.

“There is a big link and info to PALS. I was sure last time I found that to complain you needed to write to Practice Manager, but I could not find it easily this time. I did eventually find it under customer feedback.”

- Volunteer feedback

Patient Participation Group

Half the websites had information about Patient Participation Groups. However, most were out of date and did not explain what PPGs do.

Comments from our volunteers included:

“Very good and a year full of minutes online.”

“Access to forms to join but no info on group.”

“No minutes available but clear explanation on what group is.”

Slow progress

There was not as much improvement with the websites as we would have liked, but we recognise that NHS services have faced unprecedented challenges over the last 18 months due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the delivery of the vaccine programme.

Anecdotally, we know that some of our local practices are continuing to work on developing their websites.

“I have seen the GP website project and it is an area we discussed [at a Patient Participation Group] last night. The practice is hoping to improve its whole communication and social media presence which is really encouraging!”

“It's really interesting to see the enthusiasm now the practices are working together....2 years back when the PPG last met the practice was struggling in many ways to move forward...one senior partner very against computerisation so they were the last to upgrade. Encouraging now to see the change.”

- Volunteer feedback

The picture nationally

Concerns about the “fitness for purpose” of GP websites is not just a local issue. We shared our methodology with other local Healthwatch in Bristol and Oxfordshire to enable them to audit their local GP sites.

And since our original ‘Giving GP websites a Check-up’ report was published, nine other local Healthwatch have audited their GP websites.

Overall, other local Healthwatch recommendations have been broadly similar to ours – including updating and improving information about PPGs, how to make a complaint, improving accessibility and adding a link to their local Healthwatch.

What we will do

Our resample has shown variable progress in improving the accessibility and patient-friendliness of local GP websites.

We recommend that local GP services continue to improve their websites to ensure they meet the legal accessibility requirements and provide the information and advice that patients need.

We will share and discuss our findings with Healthwatch England, NHS England and Improvement, the Local Medical Committee (which represents GP practices across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough), and with Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Clinical Commissioning Group to raise awareness of the need for change.

In addition to our report findings, we also recommend that NHS Digital produces a best practice template model for standardising GP websites.

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About us

We are your local health and social care champion. If you use GPs and hospitals, dentists, pharmacies, care homes or other support services in your area, we want to hear about your experiences.

We are independent and have the power to make sure NHS leaders and other decision makers listen to local feedback and improve standards of care.

We can also help you to find reliable and trustworthy information and advice.

We also help people find the information they need about services in their area.