

Mystery Shopping: Reviewing GP practice websites for Bexhill PCN (Primary Care Network)

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1 Context and aims

1.1 Background

The COVID pandemic saw an increase in the public's use of digital and virtual platforms, such as websites, phones and Apps, due to the restrictions on face-to-face meetings and conversations.

This also shone a light on the content, accessibility and usability of many of these tools and platforms from a patient, public and user perspective.

GP websites were identified by Healthwatch East Sussex (HWES) as playing a key role in making clear how patients could access appointments, prescriptions and practice services during the lockdown, but also in sharing information on self-help, COVID restrictions and the status of other health and care services.

In response to increasing levels of feedback about the varying quality and usefulness of GP practice websites across East Sussex, Healthwatch East Sussex reviewed all GP practice websites in the county in late 2021. This involved 'Mystery Shopping' of websites by Healthwatch staff and volunteers using a standard set of questions/review points.

Our [report](#) was published in early 2022. It identified a wide variation in the quality, clarity and presentation of information, as well as issues with accessibility and ease of navigation. We set out 10 recommendations to support practices and service commissioners in developing and delivering websites that deliver benefits for all.

1.2 Context to this exercise

Healthwatch East Sussex shared the findings of its website review with NHS Sussex, as did Healthwatch in Brighton & Hove and West Sussex from similar exercises in those areas.

These identified a range of issues, but most importantly highlighted the need for some GP practice websites to be rapidly updated or refreshed so they could more effectively meet patient and public needs and expectations.

This evidence was used by NHS Sussex as part of a bid to obtain funds from NHS England that could support website changes and re-development. This was successful, and during 2022 NHS Sussex developed an initiative to provide funds to support approximately 50 GP practices across Sussex in upgrading or changing their websites.

In response to the awarding of funding, one of the recipients ([Bexhill Primary Care Network](#) [PCN] which is made up of three practices in Bexhill and the surrounding area) approached Healthwatch East Sussex to review the 'new' draft website for one of their practices using the same 'Mystery Shopping' methodology as in our original 2021 study.

1.3 Our aim and objectives

Our aim was to:

Support Bexhill PCN in delivering an effective and engaging website which meets NHS, best practice and user requirements.

We also had three objectives:

1. Repeat the Mystery Shopping exercise so that progress from the previous website could be determined.
2. Embed skills and experience amongst HWES staff and volunteers in undertaking Mystery Shopping exercises.
3. Expand HWES awareness of GP website, digital and accessibility requirements.

2 Methodology – What did we do and how?

2.1 Our approach

In partnership, Bexhill PCN and Healthwatch East Sussex staff worked together to identify what we wanted to achieve from the website review process, the steps involved and the timeline.

This included:

- Agreeing the aims, objectives and timeline of the exercise
- Finalising the methodology (in line with the aims and objectives)
- Recruiting and briefing Healthwatch volunteers
- Undertaking the Mystery Shopping review process
- Sharing feedback and implementing changes (where applicable), including reflections on the review process itself

Our mutual goal was to review four aspects of the draft website which had been developed by the team at GPsurgery.net (the developer behind the new website) in collaboration with representatives of the practice surgery and Bexhill PCN. These were:

- **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?
- **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?

Five Healthwatch East Sussex volunteers (three adult and two aged under 18) were recruited to undertake the Mystery Shopping review. *None of whom were patients or users of the practice's services.*

2.2 The Mystery Shopping process

Our Mystery Shopping review consisted of two main elements:

1. A standard set of guided questions, which each volunteer used to independently review the draft website, focusing on the four core review themes. This included closed and open-ended questions.

Each volunteer reviewed the site during a 10-day period.

The core questions remained the same as those used in the 2021 Mystery Shopping Review to provide consistency in the approach. Some additional questions were added based on learning from the 2021 exercise, as well as the criteria set for recipients of the NHS funding used to support the website's development.

2. Four scenarios were used to explore how the different elements of the website came together from a user perspective. These were provided by the PCN, who had also shared and received feedback on them from their Patient Participation Group (PPG).

They focused on four of the most common tasks that users may use the website for:

- i. How to contact the GP practice
- ii. How to order a repeat prescription
- iii. How to book an appointment
- iv. How to register at the practice

Healthwatch volunteers were asked to undertake and comment on their experience of completing these scenarios, including how many clicks it took to complete the process and how easily they could find and understand the content. This was undertaken at the same time as the guided question activity (see above).

2.3 Feedback and discussion

In early June 2023, HWES staff and volunteers met face-to-face with Bexhill PCN colleagues and a representative from GPsurgery.net (the website developer) to share feedback on the Mystery Shopping exercises (review questions and scenarios).

The discussion ran through each element in turn, providing volunteers with an opportunity to present their findings and views, and allowed PCN staff and the developer to ask questions and seek more detail, as well as offer clarification on content and technological requirements and the rationale for decisions so far.

3 Key findings and themes

3.1 Overall impressions

Feedback from Healthwatch volunteers identified that the draft website developed by GPsurgery.net in collaboration with Bexhill PCN for one its surgeries was generally well designed, laid out, had robust and clear content and delivered effective functionality.

This was across all the headline criteria: **Quality of information; Clarity of information; Ease of navigation** and **Presentation of information**.

All parties acknowledged the challenges of developing a platform or tool that was acceptable to everyone and met all possible content and usability requirements. This included balancing the preferences of users, the needs of PCN/practice staff and the operational limitations/requirements of the website (including accessibility).

Discussions identified some aspects which it was felt could be improved, either in terms of content or functionality.

The table below provides a headline summary of some of the feedback received for the draft website, identifying positive attributes [Cherish] and some aspects to which consideration for changes or updates in the future could be given [Change].

Cherish	Change
Use of clear and clean fonts and colours. NHS blue not seen as detrimental and made it feel part of wider NHS.	Slightly busy homepage - so may wish to consider whether all content is necessary. Scrolling on this and other pages may be off-putting. Potential issue for mobile users.
Home page busy, but well organised with most used information at the top.	Difficult to find contact details for 'human' points of contact at the surgery e.g. Practice Manager.
Overall, quite easy to navigate. Logical page and section names.	Scope for having menu drop-downs or tooltips, rather than clicking on top-level pages to access content?

Search function is obvious and effective. Helpful to have a consistent header and footer on all pages.	Not currently possible to see second tier pages without clicking on menus. May lead to toing and froing.
Useful to include 'news' as this enables 'personalising' the website to the locality and community, but it needs to be kept up-to-date.	Lots of link through 'tiles' in some sections – possibly design so its easier to see options all on one page.
Helpful to have NHS Health A-Z, NHS Live Well links and NHS service finder at the bottom of the site.	More detail on physical accessibility and adaptations at the surgery would be helpful e.g. accessible toilets, hearing loop etc.
Good inclusion of key information: feedback and complaint processes, PPG details, CQC rating, Privacy Policy and Data Protection.	Content needed to clarify how to make a complaint about the practice, as well as to the practice.
Robust content, which is taken from or links to the main NHS site, which also supports consistency of messaging.	Limited local community information or detail on safeguarding concerns. Scope for additional local information?
Good use of colourful imagery.	Dependence on infographics is great for accessibility, but inhibits a person-centric feel as images of people aren't included.

3.2 Scenarios

A summary of the key discussion points raised as part of the completion of the four scenarios are set out below:

3.2.1 How to contact the GP practice

Cherish	Change
Practice contact details clear and always visible in header on every page – clear phone numbers and operating hours.	Consider having an email address as part of contact information in the header. Preferred contact method for some.

Contact details easy to find and access from the home page/primary navigation menu.	Consider including a standalone 'Contact Us' page. Contact details easy to find via searches.
Home page has clear easy-to-find contact information: surgery address, map, email address and phone numbers.	Preference for personalised (staff) or more specific email addresses in addition to the generic email address.

3.2.2 How to order a repeat prescription

Cherish	Change
Clear and visible on home page tile and under 'Our services' – access via one click.	May benefit from clarifying where to get support or help from the practice with prescriptions – ring the surgery?
Easy to find and accessible via the search function.	Some technical wording and language.
Clear text.	Scope for information on out-of-hours pharmacy provision locally?
Useful guidance on the options available.	Spacing of wording in first section. Currently bunched and could be better spread.

3.2.3 How to book an appointment

Cherish	Change
Clear and visible on home page tile and under 'Our services' – access via one click.	Quite a long page which requires scrolling on both computers and other devices.
Helpful to differentiate urgent appointments from routine appointments.	Some technical wording and language which could be simplified.
Good to have appointment details all in one place on single page (one stop shop).	Online form goes to Engage/Consult option which may be confusing for some.

Useful clarification that people will see the health professional most suitable and able to help them, not always a doctor.	May help to give people advance warning of what they may be asked e.g. symptoms, duration etc.
Logically sequenced provision of information.	

3.2.4 How to register at the practice

Cherish	Change
Clear and visible on home page tile and under 'Our services' – access via one click.	GMS 1 Form for patient registration requires downloading for hard copy completion. Long and technical document.
Range of methods and pathways offered.	
Google translate built into page – helpful to have.	Perhaps clarify how long processing applications takes and what happens after an application is submitted e.g. confirmation process.
Useful inclusion of links to health information in other languages.	May benefit from clarifying where to get support or help from the practice with the application process – ring the surgery?

4 Feedback

Bexhill Primary Care Network



"We're hugely grateful to Healthwatch and their volunteers for all the work they've done over the last few years to review GP websites and provide invaluable feedback and insight into their experience of using them and how they can be improved.

The work previously undertaken was instrumental in NHS Sussex providing much needed funding for GP practices to improve their websites and I know their feedback fed into the requirements set out as part of the funding agreement.

As Bexhill PCN we know the value of involving people in our work and were really excited about working with Healthwatch as we began to develop our new GP websites across Bexhill. Their brilliant volunteers kindly gave up their time to provide some really helpful feedback on our new sites and their experience of using them. It is always really helpful to hear directly from people about their thoughts, feelings and journey and you always hear things which you had never thought of yourself!

We are hoping that Healthwatch will continue to be involved in this work as we go live and continue the ongoing process of improving and updating our sites. We're also really keen to check back in a few months to do some wider engagement about people's experience of using our GP websites across Bexhill and would welcome Healthwatch involvement in this."





"It is always incredibly valuable when we get independent, objective reviews of our GPSurgery.net platform.

The testing conducted by Healthwatch volunteers provided some excellent insights into the way visitors respond to our websites. The feedback on the task-based tests was very positive on the whole and validated the content the NHS digital team provided based on their own user testing. There were some great comments from the volunteers that challenged some of our thinking and design decisions. These have been fed back to the team here.

It is always beneficial to have a 'critical friend' in the room who isn't afraid to share a different perspective or interpretation, this really helps keep us on our toes and strive to deliver a better, more inclusive experience for all.

Thank you, we look forward to continuing this work and as we say here 'simplifying the patient journey'."



5 Next steps

Following on from this activity, Healthwatch East Sussex will:

- monitor the rollout of the reviewed practice website in mid-2023.
- engage with Bexhill PCN to explore the potential for engaging with users of the revised website, 6-12 months after it goes 'live', to gather their views on its usefulness and ability to meet public and patient needs.
- use learning from the Mystery Shopping process in any future activities reviewing the content, accessibility and usability of health and care service websites.
- share findings from the Mystery Shopping exercise with NHS Sussex and Healthwatch England so that best practice and development needs are both factored into future activities related to GP websites.
- share this report with other GP practices in East Sussex to highlight the value of regular internal and independent external reviews of websites to ensure they are 'fit-for-purpose'.



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