
What we're hearing about GP practice websites

January 2024



"The doctor said I needed to get a blood test done at my GP and so I called the next day to ask to book a blood test. They said I had to do it online, I tried but I couldn't understand how to do it and so I called back. I'm in my 80s and I try to be as independent as I can, but some of these processes defeat me."



About Healthwatch Surrey

Healthwatch Surrey is an independent health and care champion, empowering the residents of Surrey to have their voices heard. We seek out people's experiences of health and care services and share these with service providers and decision makers, to support services to improve and tackle health inequalities. We believe that health and social care providers can best improve services by listening to people's experiences.

We also provide information and signposting to help the people of Surrey find the care that best suits their needs. Any urgent or concerning experiences within this report have been escalated to the appropriate teams. All appropriate information and advice and signposting to complaints processes has already been given.

About this report

In this report we have analysed the feedback we have received from across Surrey – via our Helpdesk or website or in the community on engagements – relating to the online journey in to general practice. We have been particularly interested in the usability and accessibility of GP practice websites and to what extent this is in line with the guidance produced by NHS England in their Delivery Plan for Recovering Access to Primary Care ([NHS England » Delivery plan for recovering access to primary care](#)).

Analysis and recommendations

“GP websites no longer exist just to display information, they are becoming places where patients can complete tasks. This shift to being places where you can provide services makes websites a valuable tool for practices and worthy of time and effort to ensure they are optimised.” **NHS England** ([NHS England » Creating a highly usable and accessible GP website for patients](#))

In this report Healthwatch Surrey have identified a number of key barriers to people utilising GP practice websites to complete tasks, most notably booking appointments but also consulting with the GP and practice staff. These barriers are around **communication, information** and **flexibility** in approach.

Having an adequate digital provision in place may not be sufficient if people remain confused about how to utilise it – people need to be appropriately **communicated** with about what the provision is and how to use it, and guided through the process if they don't feel confident. This is particularly true for those with moderate to low digital confidence, lower levels of literacy and those working in a second language, as we know that poor online journeys disproportionately impact these people ([NHS England » Creating a highly usable and accessible GP website for patients](#)). There also needs to be an element of flexibility – though those who are able to use digital means should be encouraged to do so, nobody should be at an advantage or disadvantage based solely on how they contact their practice. Our findings suggest that there is still some way to go to realise this vision of equity of access.

What we've heard

Positive endorsements

We have heard some positive experiences from people who believe that their GP's digital provision is easy to use, accessible and convenient.

"I have found it easy to get an appointment, I use the online form."

201698, October 2023, Betchworth resident

"I'm very happy, I moved from Shropshire (where I think access to GPs is worse). I can get an appointment using the online form easily and they respond quickly with an appointment. I'm happy with the service so far."

201716, October 2023, Dorking resident

Gaps in provision: residents not online

Not everyone has the means to access online services and this is impacting their access to essential primary care services.

“They [the GP practice] don't issue paper prescriptions. So how do you manage to get a prescription if you don't have a mobile or you can't go online?”

201369 September 2023, Horley resident

“My Dad has been a heavy drinker for a long time. He doesn't ask for help and never will. He does need to cut down though. He would have no idea where to go and would not ask the GP. The issue with the GP is that my dad isn't good in the mornings, being a drinker. He wouldn't call up and if he did by the time he called up, they'd all be gone. He isn't online and rarely goes in.”

201179, September 2023

Following a discussion with the The Surrey Libraries Digital Welfare team (who are helping people to gain digital access) we can confirm that their insights very much support ours; some people are feeling 'forced online' which can be incredibly frustrating.

Confusion regarding digital processes

Amongst those able and willing to consider a digital route in to primary care, many feel confused about how the system works, with large numbers feeling that the requirement to contact their GP practice digitally is a barrier to access.

“The GP practice sent an SMS about booking my flu vaccination but it's timed out now so I'm not really sure what to do next. I do have the NHS App downloaded - I travel a lot and so I use it when I need to show my Covid passport, it didn't really occur to me to do anything else on it.”

201494, October 2023, Mole Valley resident

“The doctor said I needed to get a blood test done at my GP practice and so I called the next day to ask to book a blood

test. They said I had to do it online, I tried but I couldn't understand how to do it and so I called back. I'm in my 80s and I try to be as independent as I can, but some of these processes defeat me."

201487, October 2023, Epsom and Ewell resident

Confusion around the appointment booking process and a perception that appointments are hard, or even impossible, to book online is the issue people tell us most about. This leaves many people feeling helpless and 'lost', in or outside the system.

"The GP practice are hopeless. If you call up, it just tells you to go online. If you try to go in and book an appointment, they say you have to call up! I tried to get an appointment today and it was like this.

The options on the online form didn't apply before. I'm not sure what the new form has, but there wasn't a clear option for what I wanted so you just go round in circles. If you click on mental health, then you just get a bunch of options for self care which just makes you want to give up!

I had an appointment recently and after I left they sent me information asking if wanted help to stop smoking, which was nothing at all what I was after. I think they got me mixed up with someone else, but it made me feel like I hadn't been listened to."

200126, September 2023, Reigate and Banstead resident

"The online form is terrible, you can't get an appointment. You have to fill it out in the morning and by the time you get to it, it says it's full up. If you call up they just tell you to go online. It just makes we want to give up. If you do get an appointment then you get sent somewhere else then I have no idea what happens."

200125, September 2023, Reigate and Banstead resident

“It’s difficult to get through to our GP practice, you can be 27 in the queue, and there’s no option for them to call back; you have to hold on if you have the time. There isn’t an option to book appointments online.” **196746, August 2023, Waverley resident**

These issues may be magnified for diverse communities who already feel removed from the system, or those with low digital confidence.

“The surgeries are not answering the phone. Communities like ours [Asian] are suffering from lack of information and lack of education about the systems. Everything changed when covid came and people do not understand the system. It’s all about education and understanding. We have an elderly population and the IT issues are going to grow. People don’t, and can’t, access services. People are hesitant to let people into their homes as they want their privacy. Information is key. I’ve just had my flu jab but how many people will go online and book theirs? There are not enough GPs and information is not being fed through to the community.”

201500, October 2023, Woking resident

“They don’t pick up the phone. You have to go online to make an appointment and that used to work but now they have put up loads of questions to answer before you can make an appointment. People my age can’t use internet, we don’t go to school and speak English at home. You can’t walk into the surgery for an appointment, and they don’t answer the phone when you ring.”

201497, October 2023, Woking resident

“Speaking to the surgery can be hard sometimes, the receptionists ask ‘can you do it online’? But I can’t do it, I have a smartphone, but I don’t find it easy to use. I asked about how I would go about setting up online for the GP and for my husband so we could keep track on one phone, they said I need to go into the surgery and do a form or

something and I need to get an app but I can't understand what I'd need the app for. I'd rather go in to Jays, it's easier face to face in the pharmacy, that works well at the moment, the GP prescribes and then I pick it up. An improvement would be more people to pick up the phone at the GP and at the pharmacy. Staff to be more understanding when talking to you."

196678, August 2023, Runnymede resident

Lack of flexibility

A recurring theme of our insights is a perceived lack of flexibility with the online appointment booking system; people feel that they have to fit in with the digital system which doesn't always meet their individual needs.

"It's a struggle to get an appointment at my surgery. I have to go online 8-8.30 to try. You can only seem to get appointments for the same day. I would like to book an appointment with the doctor for after I get my blood test results but I am unable to do that."

196623, August 2023, Elmbridge resident

"I tried to book online but there didn't seem to be an online option, so I popped in and they said you can't come in and book so I had to go home and call up. Which I did, this was May time. When I called, they only had emergency appointments, I don't want to take an emergency appointment, there was an option to wait, but it was ages away. They said that they have abusive patients and so now, no one can go in to book. I guess I should have taken that one which was a really long wait as the months have now passed. There are only 2 female GPs and they are in 2 days a week. I would prefer to talk to a woman about this."

195969, August 2023, Spelthorne resident

"I find accessing my surgery hard. We are encouraged not to phone. You can only book to go in the triage system, by going online and registering between 6am and 12pm. What if

I was ill in the afternoon? Guess we would try and phone. I'd use 111, the walk in is too far.

When you submit a form online, the request came back with an answer by text. And we missed this a few times. I've since requested we get communicated via text and email. We missed appointments because of this.”

201938, October 2023, Guildford and Waverley resident

People regularly say that online appointment systems not always being available is both confusing and frustrating. **The message that this is to ensure patient safety is not reaching the public.**

“I have found it really difficult to get an appointment at the GP. I call at 8am to try and get the appointment. The online form isn't always available. I'm not happy with this service. I'm just not going back, I'm not wanting to complain. Better access to GP would help, especially for my mum. More appointments for mum who is diabetic. I would like to be able to attend the appointments with my mum.”

201517, October 2023 , Mole Valley resident

“Website for the GP is often 'down' or 'closed'. The number in the queue is long! It's really stressful.”

206779 December 2023, Runnymede resident

When individual needs are addressed, it leads to a more positive experience for people. Front desk staff have a significant role to play in ensuring that patients have a positive experience.

“The receptionist is really nice and gave advice to me and was helpful. I'm not good online and they know this.”

201941, October 2023, Guildford and Waverley resident

“When I called the reception staff were good and took the time to speak to me. I call the surgery, I usually do, I think it's easier.”

201434, September 2023, Epsom and Ewell resident

"I have regular UTI's that need antibiotics. My doctor is fabulous, I ring and speak to the receptionist who passes my message on. I get appointments quickly too with the same GP."

201189, September 2023, Epsom and Ewell resident

Remote consultations

Though there is now greater understanding that appointments will often not be face to face, there is some frustration that this is always the case and a feeling that certain situations would be better managed face to face.

"To be honest it's always a phone appointment. I would have preferred a face to face appointment when talking to them [GP, Hillview surgery] about a trapped nerve that I have, everything so far has been done online."

206739, December 2023, Woking resident

Whilst the digital service is undoubtedly proving more efficient, the people receiving care are sometimes left feeling that they have received a poorer service due to the perception of it being impersonal.

"I would say [the practice] are quite good, but some of the processes don't make sense to me. I have been followed up with after blood tests about lowering my cholesterol and I have asthma check ups. It's all so efficient but impersonal, the asthma check up is online now and so I don't actually see anyone, I suppose I would if it wasn't going to plan. There is no atmosphere for want of a better word in the practice anymore, it doesn't have that buzz, you don't see anyone any more, no staff in there, you wonder if they ever get to know the patients, you just plug in and go in to your appointment. I think this hinders processes in some ways."

206819, December 2023, Mole Valley resident

"Whilst this [triage] in general works well – for ongoing cases it has the disadvantage of not being able to "see my own GP" and thus

wastes time in explaining what another GP already knows this is a considerable waste of time – but we acknowledge it is probably now the route.”

203510, November 2023, Guildford and Waverley resident

Conclusion

In October 2021 Healthwatch Surrey reviewed over 200 experiences of remote consultations which were shared with us by Surrey residents between June 2020 and March 2021 [Review-of-remote-consultation-experiences.pdf \(healthwatchsurrey.co.uk\)](https://www.healthwatchsurrey.co.uk/review-of-remote-consultation-experiences.pdf). At this time patients and healthcare professionals alike were dealing with a rapid switch to remote consultations brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Our analysis of these experiences revealed that there were frustrations, worries and difficulties for some in accessing care. Two years later, though there appears to be more acceptance amongst people that routes in to primary care will be digital, many of the same difficulties are still apparent.

A successful website roll out therefore requires practices to involve patients in the process – to ensure people know **why** procedures are changing and to show them how a new website can and should be used. It also requires that those who are not able – or who choose not – to use online services still receive the same level of care and attention as those that do. Our insights indicate that the vision of a system where those who can use digital means are encouraged to do so to free up phone lines and reception desks for those who can't, a system which is truly channel agnostic, is inconsistent and often not being delivered in practice.

Ultimately, a **flexible** approach to both the provision itself and to how people are expected to use it is required. An efficient digital system should not take priority over a personal service which recognises individual needs. As the 'front door' to the practice, reception staff have a pivotal role in this recognition, and in guiding, informing and reassuring people.

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to quality**

We are committed to the quality of our information.
Every three years we perform an audit so that we can be certain of this.

The Healthwatch Surrey service is run by Luminus Insight CIC, known as Luminus.

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