Mystery Shopping: Reviewing GP practice websites in and around Rye, East Sussex

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Contents

Contact Details:

Healthwatch East Sussex

Freepost RTTT-BYBX-KCEY

Greencoat House

32 St Leonards Road

Eastbourne

East Sussex

BN21 3UT

Telephone: 0333 101 4007

Email: enquiries@healthwatcheastsussex.co.uk

1 Introduction

This study is an independent review of the content, accessibility and navigability of GP practice websites at six GP practices in East Sussex and one in Kent.

It was undertaken by Healthwatch East Sussex volunteers and staff in September 2023 to support our understanding of local health and care services and issues as part of our Rye Listening Tour.

1.1 Our aim and objectives

Our aim was to:

Review the quality, clarity and presentation of information and ease of navigation of GP practice websites serving the 2023 Rye Listening Tour study area.

We had three objectives:

1. Replicate our Healthwatch East Sussex Mystery Shopping exercise from 2021 so that the direction of travel of GP websites could be determined.

2. Expand GP practice awareness of website, digital and accessibility requirements, and recommend practical changes to improve the experience of users.

3. Embed skills and experience amongst HWES staff and volunteers in undertaking Mystery Shopping exercises.

1.2 Background

The Covid pandemic saw an increase in the public's use of digital and virtual platforms, and shone a light on the content, accessibility and usability of these tools and platforms from a patient, public and user perspective.

In response, Healthwatch East Sussex reviewed all GP practice websites in the county in late 2021. This involved lay reviews undertaken by Healthwatch staff and volunteers through a 'Mystery Shopping' methodology using a standard set of questions/review points.

Our report was published in early 2022 and 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.

1.3 Mystery Shopping of GP websites in 2023

As part of our 2023 Listening Tour in Rye and the surrounding area, we repeated our 'Mystery Shopping' review of GP websites at six practices to assess their status and determine if they had changed for the better/worse since 2021.

These six practices were identified as those most likely to be used by people in our Listening Tour area and included five practices in East Sussex and one in Kent.

In part, our goal was to explore how GP practices are contributing to 'digital and technical innovation' which is one aim of 'Improving Lives Together', the five-year strategy for the Sussex Integrated Care System (ICS), and whether websites were enabling or posing barriers for people accessing GP practices and other services.

"We need to do much more to harness the potential for the use of digital technology and information. In doing so, we can improve access and join-up our services in a way that will fundamentally transform the experience for our local population and workforce."   Improving Lives Together p23

1.3.1 Results from the National GP Patient Survey 2023

An existing indicator for assessing the effectiveness of GP practice websites is the annual Patient Experience Survey undertaken by Ipsos MORI[1]. This asks a cross-section of patients about their experience, including the ease of use of practice websites.

Details of the performance of the six practices in our study in 2021 and 2023 are set out below. *Unfortunately, this survey does not indicate the reasons for any variations.*

How easy is it to use your GP practice's website to look for information or access services? *Figures based on % of responding survey participants*				
	2021		**2023**	
	Easy	**Not Easy**	**Easy**	**Not Easy**
Northiam/Broad Oak Surgery	97%	3%	93%	7%
Ferry Road, Rye	84%	16%	45%	55%
Rye Medical centre	85%	15%	74%	26%
Harold Road Surgery	86%	14%	59%	41%
Beaconsfield Road Surgery	81%	19%	58%	42%
Orchard House Surgery [Kent]	58%	42%	50%	50%

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[1] https://gp-patient.co.uk/

The figures above indicate a decline in patient satisfaction with practice websites at all the GP practices serving our study area between 2021 and 2023.

Whilst satisfaction at some (Northiam/Broad Oak) declined very slightly, others declined more significantly, with the most significant fall being at Ferry Road practice in Rye.

Healthwatch recognises the significant and ongoing pressures on GP practices to respond to high demand for services, update frequently changing information and communicate regularly with local people.

This review is focused on positively supporting commissioners and practices, both individually and collectively, to understand lay experiences of the information they are presenting via their websites.

Any barriers, gaps, omissions, or issues identified are accompanied by recommendations on how these could be overcome, improved, or changed for the better.

2 Methodology – What did we do and how?

2.1 Our approach

During September 2023, seven Healthwatch volunteers of varying ages and IT capabilities were supported by staff to undertake a 'Mystery Shopping' review of the six GP practice websites. *None of these volunteers were patients or users of the practice's services.*

Our goal was to review four aspects of the six practice websites to assess their accessibility, usability, and functionality from a 'lay' or user perspective.

These were:

1. **Quality of information:** was it accurate, up-to-date and regularly refreshed?
2. **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?
3. **Ease of navigation:** was information easy to find, or was lots of searching required?
4. **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?

2.2 The Mystery Shopping process

Each volunteer was allocated two GP practice websites to review, with each website then being reviewed independently by two different volunteers.

Our Mystery Shopping review consisted of two main elements:

2.2.1 Part 1: Audit questions

Each website was reviewed using a standard set of guided audit questions focusing on the four core review themes (see above). This included closed and open-ended questions (see Appendix 1).

Each volunteer reviewed their two allocated GP websites during a 14-day period.

The core questions remained largely the same as those used in the 2021 Mystery Shopping review to provide consistency. Some additional questions were added based on learning from 2021, and some removed, such as Covid-19 precautions.

2.2.2 Part 2: Practical scenarios

Four scenarios were used to explore how the different elements of the website came together from a user perspective (see Appendix 2). This replicated an approach previously used with Bexhill PCN earlier in 2023.

Healthwatch volunteers undertook and recorded 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 in parallel with the audit questions (see above).

Scenarios focused on four of the most common tasks that users may use a GP website for, namely:

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

2.3 Collating our findings

Our volunteers uploaded their responses and comments for both exercises into an online survey platform so that they could be collated for each GP practice, and for the whole Mystery Shopping review.

Our findings are presented in the next section. They provide an overview from all six practices.

The audit findings are presented first, and then those from the four scenarios. These feed into our conclusions and recommendations which are set out in sections 4 and 5.

3 Key findings

3.1 Audit findings

Feedback from Healthwatch volunteers identified that the websites in use across the study area were generally well designed, laid out, had clear content, and delivered the appropriate functionality.

This was across all the headline criteria: **Quality of information; Clarity of information; Ease of navigation** and **Presentation of information**. Detail on the findings in each of the four core areas is set out below.

Each section has a table at the end which summarises the feedback received, identifying positive attributes (Cherish) and some aspects to which consideration for changes or updates in the future could be given (Change).

3.1.1 Quality of information

3.1.1.1   Basic facts about the practice

We assessed whether websites contained key pieces of information about the practice, such as contact details, opening hours, and when this information was last updated. We also reviewed how easy these were to find for users, especially when navigating from the website homepage.

All the websites presented their postal address, phone number and opening hours in a clear and easy to find way. Email addresses could be located for the majority but couldn't be found on some examples and were typically generic rather than for individuals.

"Contact details for the surgery are easily found throughout the website, especially the footer on every page, along with opening and appointment times from the relevant tiles and pages."

One feature that was less clear was when the website (or specific content) was last updated, which couldn't be identified on some websites. This may cause questions about how up-to-date information is, or how frequently attention is paid to website content.

"Not clear how up-to-date the information is, as no dates found on website."

3.1.1.2 Information about practice staff

Some feedback suggests that including information on staff, such as photos, biographies and qualifications can make websites feel more personalised, and offer greater clarity on the range of health practitioners at practices.

All the websites presented the names of the GPs at the practices, and most gave details of their qualifications and had photos, but none gave any individual contact information.
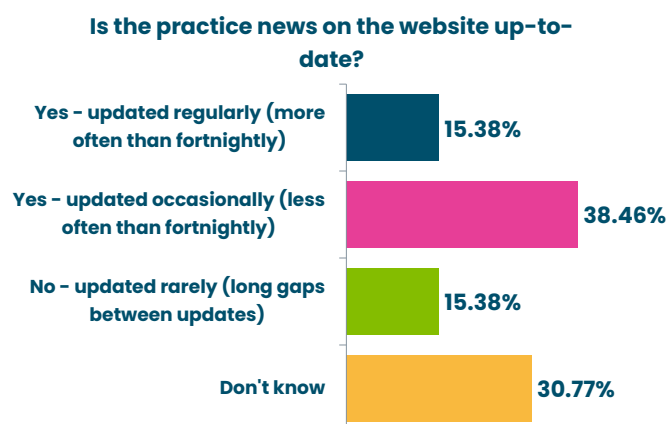
All the websites included names of other health professionals and the practice managers, with fewer presenting details of the support staff (e.g. finance, IT and administrators). A much smaller proportion included photos and qualifications for these staff members compared to their GPs. Most reviewers commented that the quality/detail of this information could be improved and made more consistent.

"Mostly only names and job titles are available. Every person is hyperlinked as though there should be more information, but there is none available."

"It is well presented with brief descriptions of most roles found from a link box on the home page under TEAM. Not every member has a photo. Some have qualifications, but not all. Some have brief descriptions of what that particular team does."

It was noticeable how few practices provided any personal contacts details for staff. This is understandable but does mean that all contact must be made through the same generic channels of communication, placing pressure on these and creating potential choke points. The potential for specific mailboxes (e.g. complaints@mygp.net) could be considered, especially for complaints, patient applications etc.

3.1.1.3 News items and updates to content

Is the practice news on the website up-to-date?

- Yes - updated regularly (more often than fortnightly): 15.38%
- Yes - updated occasionally (less often than fortnightly): 38.46%
- No - updated rarely (long gaps between updates): 15.38%
- Don't know: 30.77%

Having up-to-date information is important on any website, so it fulfils its purpose and gives confidence to those who use it.

We identified a variation in how regularly news was updated. Some practices did this regularly, others less regularly, and on some websites it was impossible to determine as publication dates were not provided.

The absence of posting/publication dates may lead people to be uncertain of how up-to-date content is.

3.1.1.4 Items of content

Overall, reviewed websites generally contained much of the core information that they are required to provide, and which patients and the public may find useful, including:

- How to give feedback to the surgery
- How to make a complaint to the surgery
- Information on the Friends and Family Test (FFT)
- Details of Patient Participation Group (PPG) activity
- The latest Care Quality Commission (CQC) rating for the surgery
- The latest Care Quality Commission (CQC) report for the surgery
- How the practice uses your information (e.g. Privacy Policy, Data Protection policies, Information statement)

Areas where content was less consistent, or gaps existed included:

- How to make a complaint about the surgery
- Accessibility statements
- GP net earnings
- How to join the Patient Participation Group
- Previous CQC ratings or reports
- Previous patient surveys or results
- Information on Healthwatch, carer support or veteran support organisations

3.1.1.5 Additional services

GP practices provide information on the services they deliver, as well as those they refer to, and those offered by other organisations.

Reviewers identified that most websites contained detailed information about the services that practices themselves provided, but there was often less information about those provided by others. Even where present it could be challenging to locate and was variable in detail.

Themes/services where information was regularly present included:

- Asthma/breathing conditions
- Child immunisation
- Cytology (e.g. smear, urine or sputum tests)
- Diabetes
- Family planning
- Flu vaccinations
- Information or guidance for carers
- Support to stop smoking
- Test results
- Weight management

Areas where content was less consistent, or gaps existed included:

- Community services (alcohol, drug or mental health-related issues)
- Dental
- Mental health
- Sexual health

3.1.1.6 Access to support out of hours

Websites provide a useful source of information for patients and the public on how to access support when surgeries are closed. However, content appeared mixed in the advice it offered.

All the websites we reviewed directed anyone with an emergency or urgent medical need when the surgery is closed to contact NHS 111. A smaller number indicated that people should go to their Accident and Emergency Department or ring 999 if appropriate.

Very limited reference was made to other forms of emergency services, such as the Emergency Dental Service, out-of-hours support provided by pharmacies, and the assistance available through Urgent Treatment Centres and Minor Injury Units.

"For people aged 5 and over go to 111.nhs.uk"

"An Out of Hours emergency number. NHS 111. 999 for emergencies - severe chest pains, severe bleeding, severe breathing difficulties or collapse."

3.1.1.7 Quality of information: cherish or change

Cherish	Change

Ease of access to main contact details and practice information.	Inability to identify when content is posted and how old it is.
Photos alongside names, roles and qualifications of staff.	Inconsistent information within and between staff types. Lack of details for non-GP staff.
Organisational charts that show make-up of teams and relationships between them.	Provision of tailored contact channels for key functions or staff e.g. complaints and/or practice manager.
Detail on staff members' roles, with an explanation of what they do.	Need for further content for patients on how to complain about a GP surgery, accessibility, joining PPGs, historic information and details of community and VCSE organisations.
Regularly updated site news and information that is patient-centric.	
Content on complaints processes, feedback methods, FFT, PPG activity, CQC ratings/reports and patient data usage.	Limited information on out-of-hours support offered beyond NHS 111, A&E and 999.
Details on health, care and wellbeing services offered by GP practices and others.	Consider how more websites can include information on mental health, sexual health and dental services.

3.1.2 Clarity of information

Information on websites needs to be clear, simple and easy to read and understand. Health and care services can use lots of specific medical phrases and acronyms, but text needs to be in plain English and focus on the terms that patients and the public are familiar with. Wording and images also need to be easy to view and read.

3.1.2.1 Appointment methods

Many GP surgeries now offer appointments in a range of different ways, for example, face-to-face, phone, video and via online platforms and apps.

The websites that were reviewed nearly all identified that practices were offering face-to-face and telephone appointments, but some were less clear on the availability of the other methods, especially video consultation and apps. This may mean that

patients are not aware of the range of options available to them, possibly creating a reliance on traditional methods.

However, this is a tricky balance to obtain, as websites offering multiple options can make it difficult for patients to determine what is best for them from the information offered, and they may default to the phone.

3.1.2.2 Overview of appointments

As well as the different types of appointment available, we explored whether websites explained how the practice would manage appointments.

We found that some websites provided more information than others. For example, most made clear that patients would be triaged at the point of seeking an appointment, as well as the different types of appointment options available. However, a majority of websites didn't explain how practices would decide if you needed a face-to-face appointment.

Able to book urgent same-day appointments over the phone or by visiting the surgery. Able to book routine appointments using an app, over the phone, or by visiting the surgery. All information is clear and very detailed.

The appointment page states that "Your first appointment will be by phone or video...... Should you need a face-to-face appointment you will be offered one."

Some gaps in information existed. Nearly all the websites failed to provide any information for patients on delays or waiting times for contacting the surgery, and delays or waiting times for appointments. Whilst these may vary, providing no information does little to help manage patient and public expectations, which may lead to frustration.

3.1.2.3 Clarity of information: cherish or change

Cherish	Change
Clear, up-to-date information written with patient-friendly wording.	Too much information is as problematic as too little.
Clear and simple details of appointment types available, and which may be most appropriate for different patient needs/requirements.	Use of technical and medical terms - plain English is more accessible.
	Offer detail on how and when face-to-face appointments may be accessed.

Information on when appointments with different practitioners are offered. Clarity on the triage process, and how people's needs will be assessed. Use of clear site/page design, and incorporation of clear font sizes, styles and colours.	Information on likely delays or waiting times for patients when contacting the surgery, or for receiving routine or emergency appointments. Improve detail on home visits, cancellations, urgent vs routine appointments etc.

3.1.3 Ease of navigation

Ease of navigation for all users is crucial for any website to be effective. A website may have all the relevant content and present it well, but if it is challenging to find or problematic to move between then people may not find what they need or may leave the site.

3.1.3.1 Search functions

All the websites possessed search functions/tools, and these were easy to locate and use. This is a marked improvement on our findings in 2021.

However, reviewers identified that the search tools were not always effective at finding the information sought, or presented the search findings in a way that still meant it was challenging to find what they were seeking.

"Search facility hit and miss. Occasionally 'Error' comes up. Refers to multiple choices, not very clear."

"The search function works if searching for the exact title page names, but using other phrases can bring up no results."

3.1.3.2 Accessibility

Our reviewers explored the information that GP websites had on the accessibility provision at physical surgery sites, as well as the accessibility of the websites themselves.

Most websites included information on disabled parking and wheelchair access at surgery sites. However, only a minority provided details about adjustments such as hearing loops, and other forms of support for those who are neurodivergent or with dementia. Limited detail was offered as to how practices may support individuals with additional needs, or how patients may request such support.

In terms of website functionality, most either had information available in other languages or the ability to translate information as required. However, reviewers identified that most sites did not appear to have text-to-speech (e.g. read-aloud) or other accessibility functionality to support those with visual impairments or other needs.

"Detailed instructions were provided on how to make the website more accessible (for example by increasing font size or changing font). Information about disabled parking and wheelchair access to the surgery."

"Not much information on reasonable adjustments for people living with a disability, although I found the practice website to be one of the better disability accessible platforms."

3.1.3.3 Ease of navigation: cherish or change

Cherish	Change
Use of alphabetically ordered menus and headings, as well as prioritised tiles/icons supporting quick access to key content.	Poorly organised and presented home pages, which make access to other content/pages challenging.
Clear and obvious search functions on websites.	Testing to ensure search functions and tools direct people quickly and simply to relevant content.
Consistent information about disabled parking, wheelchair access and other adjustments at practice sites.	Broken links and outdated information.
Provision of information in other languages, or tools to support translation.	Offer information on assistance available at practice sites for patients with disabilities e.g. hearing loops.
	Ensure text-to-speech (e.g. read aloud) and other tools are provided to ensure equality of access and website usability.
	Provide an accessibility statement, and ensure the NHS Accessible Information Standard is met.

3.1.4 Presentation of information

3.1.4.1 Home pages

Home pages are the most visited website pages, and they perform a key role in directing people to the pages and information they are seeking. In achieving this, they need to be accessible, clear and simple, yet engaging and informative.

Our reviewers indicated these websites generally did a good job in prioritising and presenting information on their home page and were visually appealing with a good combination of images, text and buttons. However, some were better than others, and one or two in this study were noticeably weaker.

"It is clear and easy to find the 'most used' items a patients would look for. There are 8 large boxes on the home page covering all of the most used topics when contacting the surgery. i.e. Appointments, Repeat prescriptions, Test Results, New Patients, Sick/Fit Notes, Contact us online, Who should I see? Self Care. These are probably the questions or areas the patients ask about most."

"Simple, easy, pictures, lots of colour."

It was recognised that all could be improved in some way, either in terms of the information they have or the way that they present it.

3.1.4.2 Presentation on different devices

Websites are increasingly viewed on a variety of devices, especially mobile phones and tablets, rather than solely on traditional computers, so the design and content need to function on all platforms.

All the websites we reviewed were clear and easy to view when reviewed on a computer, and most performed well when reviewed on a tablet or phone.

However, reviewers identified that where some websites were harder to view, this was often due to a lack of optimisation meaning that when viewed on a mobile device, fonts become challenging to read due their smaller size, and more scrolling was required as pages become longer from top-to-bottom.

3.1.4.3 Presentation of information: cherish or change

Cherish	Change

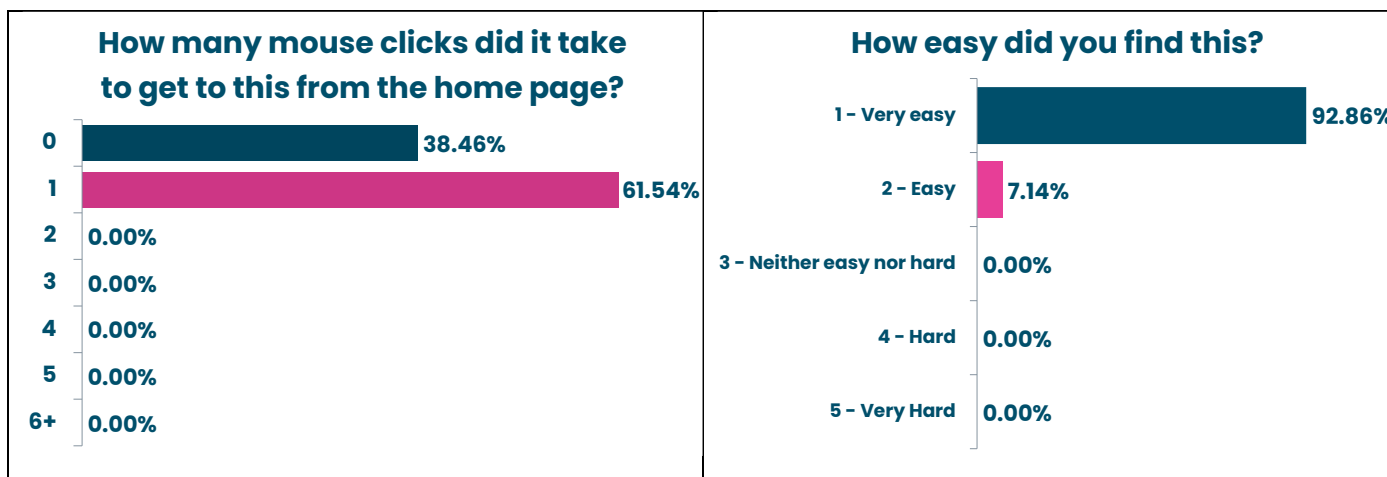|	
Well organised home page with easy-to-understand headings and drop-down menus. Use of clear and clean fonts and colours, with text large enough to read easily, especially on mobile devices. Clear buttons/tiles/icons with plain English terms that take people straight to required content.	Slightly busy homepages - is all content necessary on landing page? Need for scrolling may be off-putting and a potential issue for mobile/tablet users. Pages accessible via buttons/tiles/icons need to be included in primary navigation menu as well. Menus with ambiguous or unclear names. Ensure that website design is responsive to different screen sizes and optimised for mobile.

3.2 Scenario findings

3.2.1 How to contact the GP practice

Overall, all the GP websites did an effective job of making it clear and simple for visitors to identify details for contacting the GP practice, with the task rated as 'Very easy' in more than 90% of our reviews.

Key contact information was regularly visible on the home page, or within one click of the home page, making it quick and easy to obtain.

How many mouse clicks did it take to get to this from the home page?

Clicks	Percentage
0	38.46%
1	61.54%
2	0.00%
3	0.00%
4	0.00%
5	0.00%
6+	0.00%

How easy did you find this?

Rating	Percentage
1 – Very easy	92.86%
2 – Easy	7.14%
3 – Neither easy nor hard	0.00%
4 – Hard	0.00%
5 – Very Hard	0.00%

Some websites included all contact information on the header of every page of the website, so it could be found whichever page a visitor was on. However, this wasn't always all contact information, often only the phone number and/or email address, which meant people still needed to navigate elsewhere to find postal addresses or contact details for any specific services/individuals (if these differed).

"Very easy, clear on page, could possibly be a bigger font, with a "contact the surgery" header. Same on both desktop and mobile, phone number available on the header of page and the footer."

"It is not at the top of the page, so depending on the size in which you view your screen; it may be that you have to scroll down a little to find it."

Reviewers identified that on some sites scrolling was required to identify contact information as this was located further down pages, which made it a little harder to locate, so practices may wish to think about how it could be made more visible, such as locating it in the header.

Recommendation:
GP practices to consider whether key contact information is best located in page headers (all pages), supported by further detail on a dedicated 'Contact' page.

Things to consider
Ensure contact details are easy to find and accessible from the home page/primary navigation menu.
Ensure that practice contact details are 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.
Consider including a standalone 'Contact Us' page including surgery address, map, email address and phone numbers.
Ensure that contact details are easy to find via search function/tool and that the website is tested to check this.
Provide personalised (staff) or more specific email addresses in addition to the generic email address for specific functions e.g. registration, complaints etc.

3.2.2 How to order a repeat prescription

All the websites, bar one, provided fast and obvious links to information about how to order prescriptions, using clear information on their home page, with buttons, icons or menu options which took people to a dedicated page presenting detailed information on the prescription process. This was overwhelmingly rated by reviewers as 'Very easy'.

How many mouse clicks did it take to get to this from the home page?

6+	7.69%
5	0.00%
4	0.00%
3	0.00%
2	0.00%
1	92.31%
0	0.00%

How easy did you find this?

1 – Very easy	85.71%
2 – Easy	14.29%
3 – Neither easy nor hard	0.00%
4 – Hard	0.00%
5 – Very Hard	0.00%
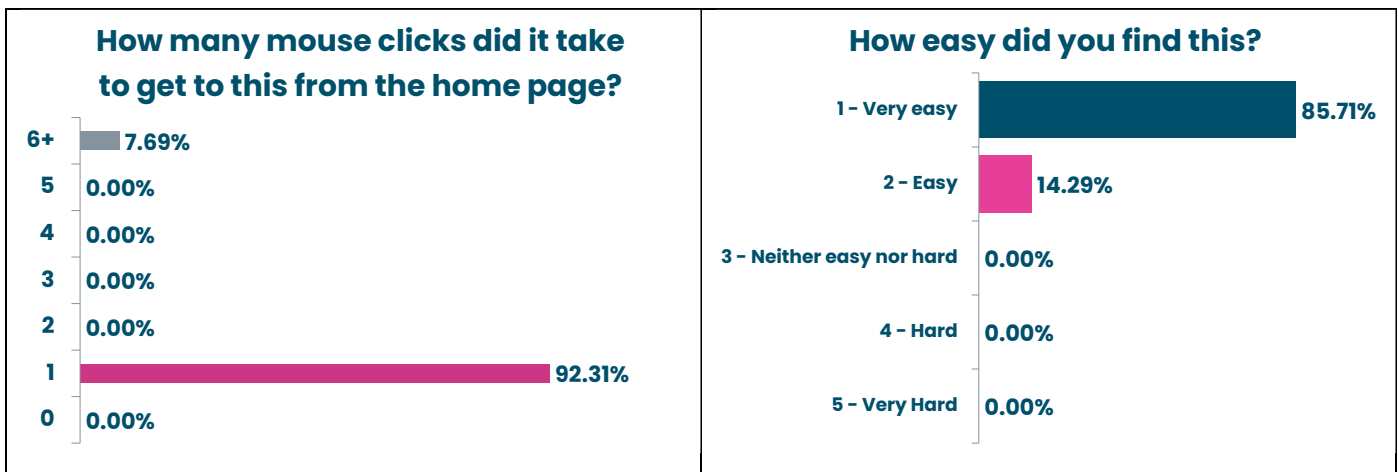
The information provided about ordering repeat prescriptions varied between websites, with some more detailed than others. For example, one site provided an online ordering form, as well as details around the process for ordering, cost of fees, electronic prescription services (including NHS App and Patient Access) and details of where to find a local pharmacy. Other sites had less information, or had similar details but spread across multiple pages, making it more challenging to find.

"Has good online form to order as well as NHS App, Patient Access links. Also has a large link to repeat prescriptions index various boxes around ordering, fees, electronic prescription services and where to find local pharmacy."

"One click to find the information on how to order a repeat prescription, but more to actually set it up. One more click to find the leaflet to read. One more click on the next link to find the form to fill in, which you then need to print off and take to the surgery reception. Easy to find, read and fill in IF you are computer literate and confident. Not everyone is."

However, whilst getting to the information was often quick and easy, reviewers identified that the process of accessing additional information or ordering a repeat prescription often took more user clicks and/or additional tasks such as printing forms and taking them to the practice. Reviewers felt some sites could be clearer in explaining these processes in practical terms and could identify support for anyone struggling with it.

Recommendation:
GP practices to consider lay reviewing or Mystery Shopping the process of ordering repeat prescriptions to assess their accessibility and usability from a user perspective.

Things to consider
Ensure 'how to order a repeat prescription' is easy to find and accessible from the home page/primary navigation menu.
Offer guidance on the range of methods offered to support prescriptions, explain how they differ, charges and timeframes.
Avoid technical wording and language.
Make sure 'how to order a repeat prescription' is easy to find via search function/tool.
Clarify how to get support or help from the practice with prescriptions and repeat prescriptions e.g. should patients ring the surgery or use another form of contact?
Explain how patients can obtain medication or prescriptions in an emergency.

3.2.3 How to book an appointment

The websites reviewed provided clear and visible content on making appointments, always within one click of the home page, and our reviewers rated this as 'Very easy' in 80% examples and 'Easy' in the others.

How many mouse clicks did it take to get to this from the home page?

Clicks	Percentage
6+	0.00%
5	0.00%
4	0.00%
3	0.00%
2	0.00%
1	92.31%
0	7.69%

How easy did you find this?

Rating	Percentage
5 - Very Hard	0.00%
4 - Hard	0.00%
3 - Neither easy nor hard	0.00%
2 - Easy	21.43%
1 - Very easy	78.57%
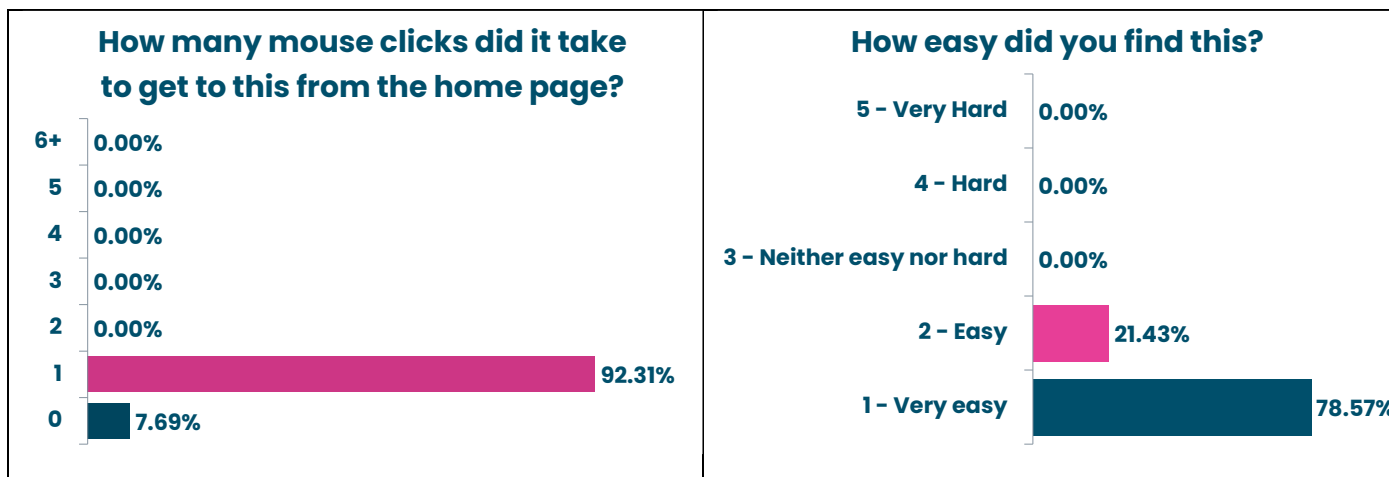
Whilst accessing information on appointments may be quick and easy, the diversity of options offered, and complexity of terms and language may prove challenging for some. Having too many options can make content unclear or difficult to understand, especially about the merits of the different systems and how some may be more suitable for some patients and circumstances than others.

"Using the "Book, change or cancel an appointment" tile it opens in a new window on both desktop and mobile. However, using the search function, or navigation menu, you stay within the same window and are taken to the correct page."

"Upon loading the homepage there is a clear button very near the top labelled 'appointments'. Upon clicking this it takes the user to a page with clearly labelled headings and instructions on how to book urgent appointments, routine appointments, and how to access help when the surgery is closed."

We observed variations in the websites we reviewed, with some doing a better job in guiding patients by reducing information and by using headings and instructions alongside the information to guide their behaviour - for example, by having distinct sections/content and instructions for routine and out-of-hours appointments. Some were also clearer about the merits of different types of appointment.

Recommendation:

GP practices to make appointment content as clear as possible, using instructions and guides to support patients, whilst also offering clarity on timescales and waits.

Things to consider

Ensure 'how to book an appointment' is easy to find and accessible from the home page/primary navigation menu.

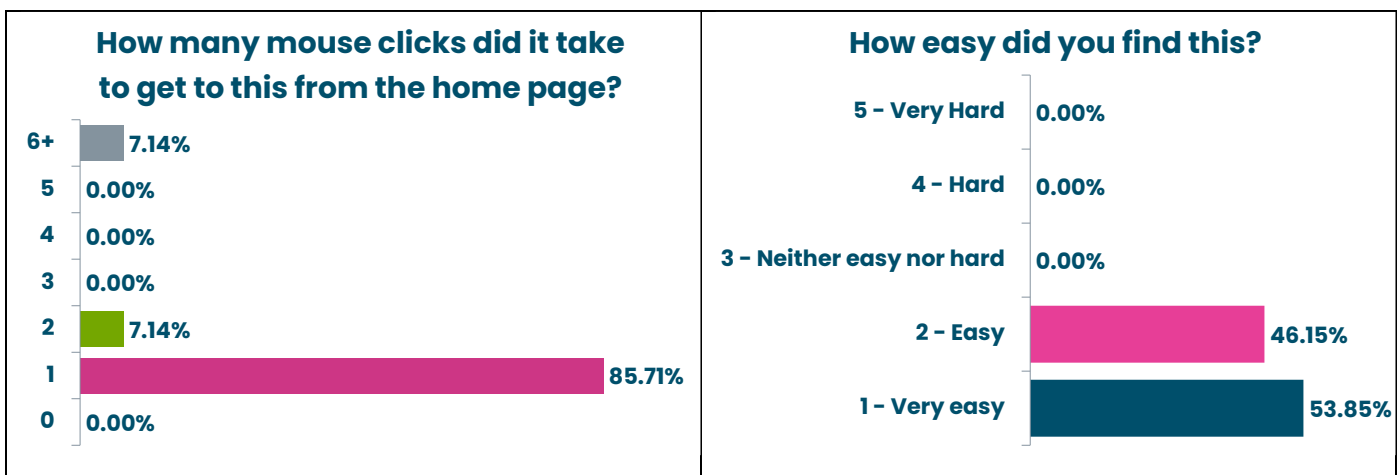| |
|---|
| Offer guidance to help differentiate booking methods for urgent appointments from routine appointments. |
| Avoid technical wording and language. |
| Give people advance warning of what they may be asked at the point of seeking an appointment e.g. symptoms, duration etc. |
| Useful to clarify that people may see the health professional most suitable and able to help them i.e. not always a doctor. |
| Provide any details on likely waiting times for appointments, especially for standard activities or procedures, to help manage expectations. |

3.2.4 How to register at the practice

Registering at GP practices was the least clear of the information we reviewed in our four scenarios. Only half of our reviewers rated it as 'Very Easy', which is far lower than in the other three scenarios.

How many mouse clicks did it take to get to this from the home page?

6+	7.14%
5	0.00%
4	0.00%
3	0.00%
2	7.14%
1	85.71%
0	0.00%

How easy did you find this?

5 – Very Hard	0.00%
4 – Hard	0.00%
3 – Neither easy nor hard	0.00%
2 – Easy	46.15%
1 – Very easy	53.85%

Most websites had information related to new patients or joining the practice within one click of their homepage. However, on one website the information was more than six clicks away, which may make it challenging for users to find and access. Terminology was also mixed including 'Join the practice', 'New patients' and 'How to register' which could be made clearer and more consistent.

"It took one click to find the information, but 8 before I actually got as far as the form."

"The forms need to be printed and hard copy with ID taken to surgery. What if you do not have a printer? Does not say on website that hard copies are available at surgery."

Whilst one practice website provided an online registration form, the bulk of registration methods required patients to download documentation or collect it in hard copy from

the practice, complete it and then return it to the practice. This may be restrictive for those without printers or those for whom accessing the practice may be challenging, such as working-age adults or those with mobility issues. Websites weren't always clear on the timescales for registration and confirmation of completion i.e. when registration would be confirmed or how long after applying they could make an appointment.

One practice provided dedicated contact details to support patients seeking to register with a practice, which may help patients complete registrations and reduce pressure on other channels, such as phone lines receiving requests for appointments.

Recommendation:

GP practices to explore how online forms and digital methods can be used to reduce the need for the printing or return of patient registration documents.

Things to consider
Ensure 'how to register at the practice' is easy to find and accessible from the home page/primary navigation menu.
Clarify where to get support or help from the practice with the application process – should patients ring the surgery or use another form of contact?
Make clear what the confirmation process and timescale for applications is, and when patients can make an appointment after submitting their application.
Useful to include links to application information in other languages or via translation tool.
Explore non-hard copy methods for applications to join as a patient.

4 Conclusions

Well-designed and maintained GP websites play a key role in making clear how patients may access appointments, prescriptions, and practice services, but also how they may get information on self-help and be directed to other health and care services.

Whilst the 2023 GP patient survey indicated a decline in patient satisfaction with websites at all six practices, our review found that they collectively performed well against our assessment criteria, but we acknowledge reviews are subjective.

We found they combine attractive, engaging, and user-friendly design features with comprehensive content. Whilst variations still exist in the quality of some content and functionality, overall, they represent an improvement on our 2021 findings.

All the practice websites performed well in delivering the most common functions patients require, with each providing clear and quick access (within one or two clicks) to information about contacting the practice, making appointments, ordering prescriptions, and registering as a patient. However, the latter is identified as an area where the process may be made clearer, electronic application processes enhanced and support identified.

Reviewers identified that appointment information was often comprehensive, but on occasion was very detailed, risking confusion rather than making it easier for patients to be clear what appointments/services they can access. Information on waiting times or delays wasn't generally provided but may be useful in managing patient expectations.

Home page designs and navigation headings were generally clear and easy to read. Contact details were clearly shown, and in some designs were present in every page header. One area for consideration is whether links located in page content should also be replicated in menus, so content can be accessed from any location (simplifying navigation). Search tools were present on all sites but varied in effectiveness.

One area where practice websites could collectively improve is in signposting to other health, care and community services, especially mental and sexual health, but also support available if the surgery is closed, such as pharmacies and Urgent Treatment Centres, in addition to NHS 111 and 999.

In terms of accessibility, language translation options appear common, but website adaptations for other needs, such as visual impairment were less identifiable. So too was information about adaptations and adjustments at practices' physical sites. A key

area for consideration is ensuring practice websites are compatible with mobile devices, as these become 'go to' methods for many people.

5 Recommendations

Following on from this activity, Healthwatch East Sussex has identified the following recommendations:

5.1 Recommendations for GP practices

1. GP practices should involve patients and other lay representatives (e.g. Patient Participation Groups) in regularly reviewing their website content and functionality (at least annually), especially during the development of new or updated websites.

2. GP practices to consider how to regularly review and lay test their website content and formatting, to ensure that they meet the NHS Accessibility Standard but also user requirements.

3. GP practices should engage with website hosts, developers and managers to obtain and review website analytics, in order to better understand the most and least accessed webpages and to help them organise content effectively.

4. GP practices to consider whether key contact information is best located in page headers (all pages), supported by further detail on a dedicated 'Contact' page.

5. GP practices to consider lay reviewing or Mystery Shopping the process of ordering repeat prescriptions to assess accessibility and usability from a user perspective.

6. GP practices to make appointment content as clear as possible, using instructions and guides to support patients, whilst also offering clarity on timescales and waits.

7. GP practices to explore how online forms and digital methods can be developed further to support increased access to patient registration, alongside the retention of traditional methods, so that access is equitable.

8. GP practices to ensure that websites are compatible and usable with mobile phones and tablets. GP practices should use website analytics to support their understanding of equality of access and effectiveness of design.

9. GP practices to ensure that their websites meet accessibility standards (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) international standard) and incorporate appropriate tools to support language translation and those with visual impairment.

10. GP practices to consider how information on accessibility features and adaptions at practice sites may be included and clearly identified on their websites.

5.2 Recommendations for NHS Sussex

11. NHS Sussex should undertake regular audits and spot checks of GP practice websites to ensure they are meeting statutory and best practice requirements.

12. NHS Sussex to explore sharing of best practice on effective designs and content, with and between GP practices and Primary Care Networks (PCNs).

13. NHS Sussex to consider how to provide ongoing investment and support for GP practices and Primary Care Networks in procuring websites, engaging with developers, and providing accessible content.

5.3 Recommendations for Healthwatch East Sussex

14. Healthwatch East Sussex should share the learning from this exercise with local GP practices, NHS Commissioners, other local Healthwatch, and Healthwatch England to contribute to the local, pan-Sussex and national understanding of the status of GP websites.

15. Healthwatch East Sussex should explore the use of Mystery Shopping and other review methods to assess the quality and usability of GP websites on a rolling basis.

16. Healthwatch East Sussex should continue to adapt and evolve its website Mystery Shopping methodology using the learning from this process, especially why findings from these exercises may differ from those captured via public engagement exercises.

6 Appendix 1: Audit Questions

GP Websites Mystery Shopping 2023: Audit Questions

Section 1: Surgery Information

1. Name of Mystery Shopper (reviewer)

2. Date and time of review

3. What is the name of the GP practice being reviewed?

4. What is the web address (url) of the website you are reviewing for this practice?

5. Which Primary Care Network (PCN) is it part of? (if known)

6. Which East Sussex Local Authority area is the GP practice located in?

Eastbourne Borough	
Hastings Borough	
Lewes District	
Rother District	
Wealden District	
Other (please specify)	

Section 2: Basic functions

7. Does the website have a search function?

Yes – clear and easy to find	Yes - challenging to find	No	Don't Know [Couldn't find]

8. Does the search tool accurately find the information you are seeking?

Yes – most of the time	Yes – some of the time	No	Don't Know [Couldn't find]

9. How effectively do you feel information is prioritised and presented on the home page?

1 Very poorly	2	3 Averagely	4	5 Very effectively

Please describe the reasons behind your rating:

10. How well does the website display on a mobile device, such as a phone or tablet? (test home page only)

	Very well clear and easy to view	Adequately	Poorly Unclear or difficult to view	Not tested
Phone				
Tablet				
Computer				

Section 3: Website information

11. Which basic facts about the Surgery are located on the website?

	Yes – clear and easy to find	Yes – challenging to find	No	Don't Know [Couldn't find]
Postal Address				
Phone Number				
Email address				
Opening hours of surgery				
Operating hours (if different from above)				
Contact Form				
The date when the website was last updated				

12. Please describe how easy to find and up-to-date these pieces of information are:

13. Which pieces of information are shown in relation to the staff at the practice?

Please tick all that apply

	GPs	Nurses	Other health professionals and practitioners	Practice Manager	Support staff (e.g. finance, IT, administrators)
Names					
Photos					
Qualifications or experience					
Personal contact details					
Other information					

Please describe how effectively this is presented:

14. Is the news section on the website up-to-date?

Yes - updated regularly (more often than fortnightly)	
Yes - updated occasionally (less often than fortnightly)	
No - updated rarely (long gaps between updates)	
Don't know	
Not applicable	

Comment(s) or observations on news section:

15. Does the website provide the following information:

	Yes – clear and detailed	Yes - limited information	No	Don't Know [Couldn't find]
How to give feedback to the surgery				
How to make a complaint **to** the surgery				
How to make a complaint **about** the surgery				
An Accessibility statement				
GP Net earnings				
Information on the NHS Friends and Family Test (FFT)?				
Details of Patient Participation Group (PPG) activity?				
How to join the surgery's Patient Participation Group (PPG)?				
The latest Care Quality Commission (CQC) rating for				

the surgery				
The latest Care Quality Commission (CQC) report for the surgery				
Any previous patient surveys or results				
How the practice uses your information [e.g. Privacy Policy, Data Protection policies, Information statement)				
Information on Healthwatch, carers support or veterans support organisations				
Other forms of feedback or how to get involved with the surgery				
Practice newsletter				

Please describe how easy to find and up-to-date these pieces of information are or are not:

16. How easy is it to locate and access information on the following:

	Easy – clear and easy to find	Average – neither easy nor hard	Hard – challenging to find	Don't Know [Couldn't find]
Make, change or cancel an appointment				
Get a repeat prescription online				
Get a sick note for work				
Get tests results				
Join the surgery as a patient				

17. Which appointment methods are currently shown on the website as available with the surgery?

Please tick all that apply

	Yes	No	Don't Know [Couldn't find]
Phone appointment			
Video appointment			
E-consult			
Face-to-face			

Other (please specify):

18. Is there information or guidance about how to book an appointment?

Yes - clear and detailed	Yes - limited information	No	Don't Know [Couldn't find]

19. Please identify how easy you found it to understand the information or guidance on how to book an appointment:

Very hard	Hard	Easy	Very Easy	Don't Know [Couldn't find]

20. What does the website say about making and having an appointment at this time?

	Yes	No	Don't Know [Couldn't find]
Does it say you will be triaged over the phone first?			
Does it say how the surgery will decide if you need a face-to-face appointment (the triage process)?			
Is any information provided on delays or wait			

times for contacting the surgery?			
Is any information provided on delays or wait times for appointments?			

Please list any other information about booking appointments e.g. advance booking options, same day only etc.

Section 4: Other information

21. Which services, if any, does the website direct you to if you have an emergency or urgent medical need or the surgery is closed (out-of-hours)?

    Please tick all that apply

NHS 111	
Accident and Emergency Department	
Minor Injuries Unit (MIU)	
Pharmacy	
Emergency Dental Service (EDS)	

Other(s) – please specify:

22. Is there information on how to register with the practice as a new patient?

Yes - and it is accepting new patients	Yes - but it isn't accepting any new patients	No	Don't Know [Couldn't find]

23. Which of the following formats can patients use to apply to register as a patient at the practice?

    Please tick all that apply

	Yes	No	Don't Know [Couldn't find]

Online form (direct online submission)			
Downloadable form (to print, complete and submit)			
Postal application			
Email request (no form)			
Contact the Surgery			
No information found			

Other – please specify:

24. Please identify whether information is provided on the following accessibility themes:

	Yes	No	Don't Know [Couldn't find]
Is information available in other languages?			
Is any option provided for users of the website to have information translated into other languages?			
Is there information about disabled access to the surgery?			
Is there information about hearing loop systems at the surgery?			
Is information available about other assistance for patients with disabilities?			
Are Text-to-speech (e.g. ReadAloud) or other accessibility functions available?			
Is any information provided on the Accessibility Regulations 2018?			

Please indicate specific types of access or other adaptations mentioned e.g. wheelchair access, neurodiversity, dementia etc.

25. Is information provided about the process for access to prescriptions or medication?

Yes - clear and detailed	Yes - limited information	No	Don't Know [Couldn't find]

26. Please identify if information is provided in relation any of the following services:

   Please tick all that apply

	Yes	No	Don't Know [Couldn't find]
Asthma/Breathing conditions			
Child Immunisation			
Community Services (Alcohol, Drug or Mental Health-relates issues)			
Cytology (e.g. smear, urine or sputum tests)			
Dental			
Diabetes			
Family Planning			
Flu vaccinations			
Health Promotion			
Information or guidance for Carers			
Mental Health			
Sexual Health			
Support to stop smoking			
Test Results			
Weight Management			

Please identify any other services which are provided but which do not appear in the list above:

27. Is information provided about community or voluntary services which may benefit patients

Yes - clear and comprehensive	Yes - some limited information	No	Don't Know [Couldn't find]

Other (please specify):

Section 5: Overall rating and comments

28. Overall, how would you rate the website, in terms of:

	1 Very Poor	2	3 Average	4	5 Excellent
Clarity of information - Is it clear, in Plain English, with few acronyms?					
Ease of navigation - Is it clear what information is in different parts of the website?					
Quality of information - Is the information provided accurate and up-to-date?					
Layout and presentation - Is the design engaging and easy to read? Is there too much or little information?					

Please explain the ratings you have provided above?

29. What did you like most about the website?

30. What did you like least about the website?

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│                                                                   │
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31. Do you have any other comments in relation to the content and effectiveness of this website?

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7 Appendix 2: Scenario Questions

GP Websites Mystery Shopping 2023: Scenarios

Section 1: Surgery Information

1. Name of Mystery Shopper (reviewer)

2. Date and time of review

3. What is the name of the GP practice being reviewed?

4. What is the web address (url) of the website you are reviewing for this practice?

5. Which Primary Care Network (PCN) is it part of? (if known)

6. Which East Sussex Local Authority area is the GP practice located in?

Eastbourne Borough	
Hastings Borough	
Lewes District	
Rother District	
Wealden District	
Other (please specify)	

1) Find out how to 'Contact the GP practice'

How many mouse clicks did it take to get to this from the home page?

| |
| |

How easy did you find this?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Easy	Easy	Neither easy nor hard	Hard	Very Hard

Explain your experience of completing this task a user:

| |
| |

2) Find out how to 'Order a repeat prescription'

How many mouse clicks did it take to get to this from the home page?

| |
| |

How easy did you find this?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Easy	Easy	Neither easy nor hard	Hard	Very Hard

Explain your experience of completing this task a user:

| |
| |

3) Find out how to 'Book an appointment'

How many mouse clicks did it take to get to this from the home page?

| |
| |

How easy did you find this?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Easy	Easy	Neither easy nor hard	Hard	Very Hard

Explain your experience of completing this task a user:

| |
| |

4) Find out how to 'Register at the practice'

How many mouse clicks did it take to get to this from the home page?

How easy did you find this?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Easy	*Easy*	*Neither easy nor hard*	*Hard*	*Very Hard*

Explain your experience of completing this task a user:

healthwatch
East Sussex