healthwatch County Durham

Access to GP Services

Research into the experience of people in County Durham when accessing advice, information and appointments at their GP practice since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic

April 2021

Contents

Healthwatch County Durham

Healthwatch County Durham is the county's consumer champion for health and social care, representing the voices of current and future users to decision makers.

We listen

We listen to patients of health services and users of social care services, along with their family members or carers, to find out what they think of the services they receive.

We advise

We advise people how to get the best health and social care for themselves and their family. We provide help and information about all aspects of health and social care provided in County Durham.

We speak up

We make sure that consumers views are heard by those who provide health and social care. Wherever possible we try to work in partnership with providers to influence how they make improvements.

Executive summary

In 2020 Healthwatch County Durham asked the public what health and social care topics they wanted us to look at in more detail in 2020/21. There were seven proposals to prioritise based on intelligence gathered from our signposting work and information provided by partner organisations. Investigating people's experiences of accessing GP services was selected by the public as one of their top four priorities.

We had already undertaken work looking at patient experience therefore it was determined to carry out a further specific piece of work to review GP practice websites and out of hours telephony. As we have a team of experienced Healthwatch County Durham volunteers we utilised their skills to conduct this further research
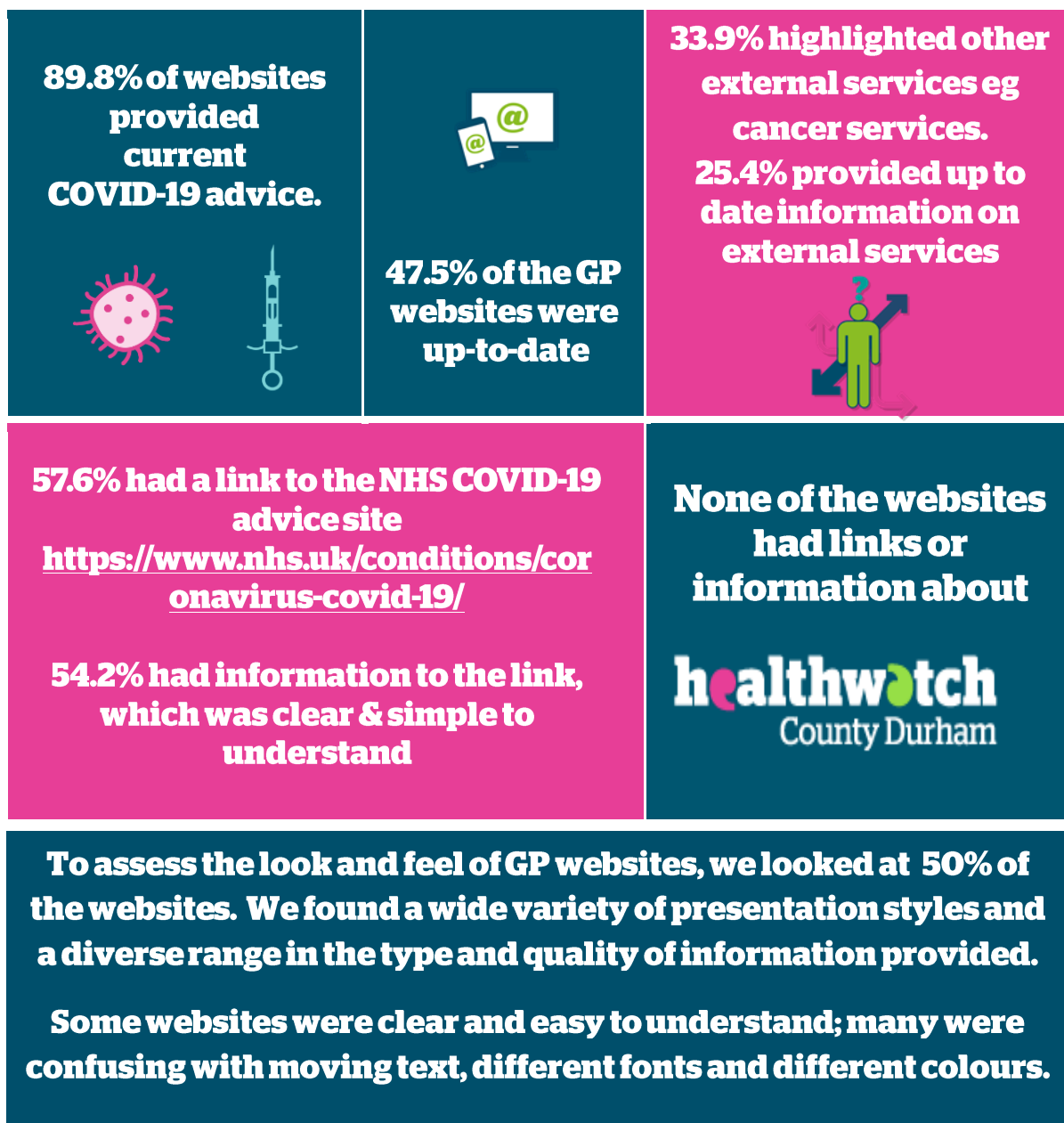
We aimed to

- Engage with patients, to hear their experiences when accessing, advice, information and appointments at their GP Practice during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Research the quality of the information provided on automated telephone messages during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Research the quality of GP practice websites during the COVID-19 pandemic

We will inform commissioners and service providers of what we have found to enable them to reflect on the way in which digital services are provided and to make improvements where required.

Key Findings

GP Practice Websites

Of the 59 GP practice websites across County Durham:

89.8% of websites provided current COVID-19 advice.

47.5% of the GP websites were up-to-date

33.9% highlighted other external services eg cancer services.
25.4% provided up to date information on external services

57.6% had a link to the NHS COVID-19 advice site https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/

54.2% had information to the link, which was clear & simple to understand

None of the websites had links or information about

healthwatch County Durham

To assess the look and feel of GP websites, we looked at 50% of the websites. We found a wide variety of presentation styles and a diverse range in the type and quality of information provided.

Some websites were clear and easy to understand; many were confusing with moving text, different fonts and different colours.

GP Practice Automated Telephone Messages

Of the 77 GP practices across County Durham that were telephoned out of hours:

100% of practices included advice on general health matters and this was clear and easy to understand (call 999 or 111).

Only a very small number of practices (2) provided information on how to cancel an appointment or referred patients to the online booking system (5).

55.84% of practices did not include information on how to get an appointment with a GP - although 32.46% provided practice opening hours for patients to telephone to make an appointment

7.79% of the automated messages were complicated and not clear or easy to understand

Only 2 practices included advice on COVID-19 on their automated telephone message

Apart from providing information on opening hours and accessing the practice website, there was very little information on how to get an appointment with a health professional other than a GP

Observations

During these unprecedented times health and social care services have had to quickly re-configure their services. COVID-19 has changed the way people access services, with the move from face to face to remote provision happening almost overnight. Whilst there are examples of good service provision, we believe that there is more that could be done to make improvements and we have made the following observations:

- Over 50% of the websites we looked at accessed displayed out of date information. All practices should review their websites to ensure that up to date information is provided and easily understood, given that face to face access to services is limited.
- Each Primary Care Network should consider appointing a member of staff who can maintain and update each website. This would ensure information is kept current and consistent making it easier and more effective for the patient to navigate. User testing should be incorporated to ensure that the website design and content is fit for purpose.
- Whilst 89.8% of websites provided current COVID-19 advice and 57.6% had a link to the NHS COVID-19 advice site, only 2 practices included such advice on their automated telephone messages. Automated telephone messages should provide clear and succinct COVID-19 advice for their patients as not all patients will want or be able to go online to access information.
- Only 33.9% of websites highlighted other external services and only 25.4% provided up to date information. Websites should be used more effectively to provide further, current health care information.
- We found that there was a huge variation in the amount of information provided on websites and in their look and feel. Some were clear and easy to understand but many were very busy, with moving text, different fonts and different colours used. This can make it difficult to read or to find your way around the site. Practices should ensure that their websites provide information that is accessible to all.
- None of the websites provided information on Healthwatch County Durham. We know that practice staff hand out HWCD information leaflets and refer patients to our service. Since far fewer patients are going into the surgery this information should be provided remotely with HWCD being visible on practice websites.
- Automated telephone messages should provide clear, consistent and succinct information on how to book an appointment as 55.84% practices did not provide this. In addition some of the messages were complicated, not providing the caller with enough time to make a note of additional telephone numbers or other appropriate information.
- Service providers should reassess their infrastructure as their current telephone systems may not be effective given the increase in remote triage and telephone consultations.

"I was unable to contact my GP surgery by phone on an occasion when I had urgent care needs - there was no recorded message and the phone rang until it cut out."

Background to this work

In 2020 Healthwatch County Durham asked the public what health and social care topics they wanted us to look at in more detail in 2020/21. There were seven proposals to prioritise based on intelligence gathered from our signposting work and information provided by partner organisations. Investigating people's experiences of accessing GP services was selected by the public as one of their top four priorities.

We aimed to

- Engage with patients, to hear their experiences when accessing, advice, information and appointments at their GP Practice during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Research the quality of the information provided on automated telephone messages during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Research the quality of GP practice websites during the COVID-19 pandemic

In the coming months we are planning to engage with focus BAME, refugees/asylum seekers and the LGBTQ+ communities, to find out what is important to them about the way in which they receive care in the future.

We are also planning to engage with surgery staff to better understand the changes in the way practices have supported patients since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and what that means for staff and patients. Due to the pressures on primary care as a result of the COVID-19 vaccination programme we plan to carry out this engagement later in 2021.

What we did

In 2020 we had already engaged with patients, to hear their experiences of accessing, advice, information and appointments at their GP Practice. In October 2020 we published our report and our findings can be found here:

http://www.healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk/sites/default/files/hwcd_covid-19_coronavirus_lockdown_experiences_report_0.pdf

With the increased need for patients to access GP services digitally, given that they were advised not to attend GP surgeries due to COVID-19, we worked with our volunteers to research the quality of the information provided on automated telephone messages and GP practice websites. With an increased use by patients of these systems, we wanted to find out if they provided accessible and up to date information.

We developed a spreadsheet for our volunteers to record their findings. To ensure the information on websites and automated telephone messages could be compared with others across County Durham we developed a series of prompts.

Website research prompts:
- Is the website up to date or are there out of date items still being shown?
- Is there current COVID-19 advice?
- Is there a link to the NHS COVID-19 advice site? https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/
- Is the information on the website clear and easy to understand?
- Are any other external services highlighted eg cancer services?
- If there are links to other external services is the information provided up to date?
- Is there information/links to Healthwatch County Durham?

Automated telephone message prompts:
- Does the automated message include advice on COVID-19?
- Is this information clear and easy to understand?
- Does the automated message include advice on general health matters?
- Is this information clear and easy to understand?
- Does the automated message include information on how to get an appointment with a GP?
- Is this information clear and easy to understand?
- Does the automated message include information on how to get an appointment with a health professional other than a GP?
- If the automated message provides telephone or website details, does it give you sufficient time to make a note of these details?

What We Heard

GP Practice Websites

Of the 59 GP practice websites across County Durham:
- 47.5% of websites were up to date.
- 89.8% provided current COVID-19 advice.
- 57.6% had a link to the NHS COVID-19 advice site? https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/ (N.B. A few websites had a link to COVID-19 advice but not via the NHS).
- 54.2% had information to the link, which was clear & simple to understand.
- 33.9% highlighted other external services eg cancer services.
- 25.4% provided up to date information on external services.
- 0.0% had information/links to Healthwatch County Durham.

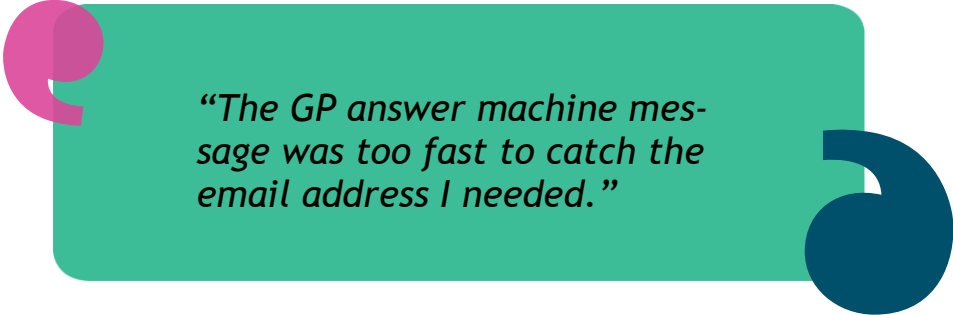General comments made by our volunteer researching the websites include:

- The provision of Cookie options, Care Quality Commissioning scoring and GDPR notices is not standard.
- Many sites still refer to Durham Dales Clinical Commissioning Group.
- Few sites date their latest page update.
- Quite often the NHS site link is in a pop-up that you delete to read the Homepage (so you may miss it).

To assess the look and feel of GP websites, we did a search of 50% of the websites. This search showed a wide variety of styles and information provided. Some websites were clear and easy to understand; many were confusing with moving text, different fonts and different colours used.

GP Practice Automated Telephone Messages

Of the 77 GP practices across County Durham that were telephoned out of hours:

- Only 2 practices included advice on COVID-19 on their automated telephone message.
- 100% of practices included advice on general health matters and this advice was clear and easy to understand (call 999 or 111).
- 55.84% of practices did not include information on how to get an appointment with a GP although 32.46% provided practice opening hours for patients to telephone to make an appointment.
- A very small number of practices (2) provided information on how to cancel an appointment or referred patients to the online booking system (5).
- 7.79% of the automated messages were complicated and not clear or easy to understand.
- Apart from providing information on opening hours and accessing the website, there was very little information on how to get an appointment with a health professional other than a GP.

"The GP answer machine message was too fast to catch the email address I needed."

Additional Findings

An online focus group with our volunteers also provided the following feedback:

"I tried the 'E-Consult' online tool to get help on a concern but found it impossible and fiddly. I knew they had my medical records so why did I have to input medications and lots of other information?"

"Before the change to GP surgery access, the reception staff could have a red flag on the system, against an individual's records. So when they came along the reception staff knew there may be an additional need/consideration (i.e. hard of hearing/dementia) for example. Can this be incorporated into the changes to this service?"

Observations

During these unprecedented times health and social care services have had to quickly re-configure their services. COVID-19 has changed the way people access services, with the move from face to face to remote provision happening almost overnight. Whilst there are examples of good service provision, we believe that there is more that could be done to make improvements and we have made the following observations:

- Over 50% of the websites we looked at accessed displayed out of date information. All practices should review their websites to ensure that up to date information is provided and easily understood, given that face to face access to services is limited.
- Each Primary Care Network should consider appointing a member of staff who can maintain and update each website. This would ensure information is kept current and consistent making it easier and more effective for the patient to navigate. User testing should be incorporated to ensure that the website design and content is fit for purpose.
- Whilst 89.8% of websites provided current COVID-19 advice and 57.6% had a link to the NHS COVID-19 advice site, only 2 practices included such advice on their automated telephone messages. Automated telephone messages should provide clear and succinct COVID-19 advice for their patients as not all patients will want or be able to go online to access information.
- Only 33.9% of websites highlighted other external services and only 25.4% provided up to date information. Websites should be used more effectively to provide further, current health care information.
- We found that there was a huge variation in the amount of information provided on websites and in their look and feel. Some were clear and easy to understand but many were very busy, with moving text, different fonts and different colours used. This can make it difficult to read or to find your way around the site. Practices should ensure that their websites provide information that is accessible to all.

- None of the websites provided information on Healthwatch County Durham. We know that practice staff hand out HWCD information leaflets and refer patients to our service. Since far fewer patients are going into the surgery this information should be provided remotely with HWCD being visible on practice websites.
- Automated telephone messages should provide clear, consistent and succinct information on how to book an appointment as 55.84% practices did not provide this. In addition some of the messages were complicated, not providing the caller with enough time to make a note of additional telephone numbers or other appropriate information.
- Service providers should reassess their infrastructure as their current telephone systems may not be effective given the increase in remote triage and telephone consultations.

We will inform commissioners and service providers of what we have found to enable them to reflect on the way in which digital services are provided and to make improvements where required.

Many thanks to all of our volunteers for contributing to this report, particularly Tony Bentley and Anne Thompson.