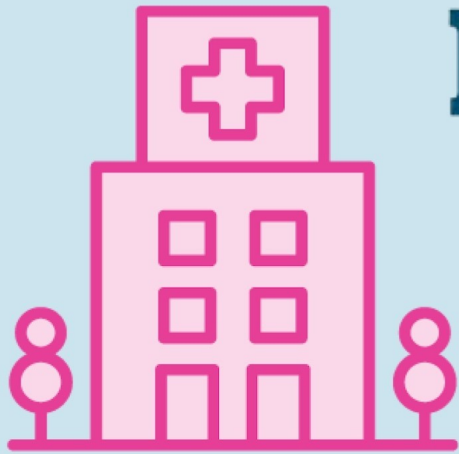


March 2021



healthwatch
North Yorkshire

North Yorkshire GP Website Check-Up



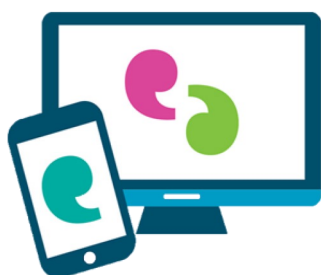
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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for everyone working in the health and social care system. GP practices have, like others, had to respond to new demands which have forced change upon them. With a heightened reliance on digital platforms for the sharing of information between service providers and service users.



With a second lockdown before Christmas and another since, rapid changes to COVID-19 advice, and changing tiers, we at Healthwatch North Yorkshire decided it was important to undertake a GP website health check. Websites are for many people their first point of access to information, and it is therefore vital that GP websites are providing easily accessible information for their patients.

Patient feedback that we have gathered since the start of the pandemic has demonstrated the importance of GP practices – with appointments and access being main areas of concern for members of the public in North Yorkshire. The ability to find relevant information easily through GP websites is more pressing at a time when there are long waiting times on GP phone-lines, due to increased traffic and staff shortages due to illness.¹

We, therefore, carried out a ‘health check’ on GP websites in the North Yorkshire county area² to check how up-to-date and accessible information was, and specifically COVID-19 information, and in addition, we wanted to find examples of best practice to be able to share more widely across the primary care sector.

This work follows in the footsteps of our colleagues at other Local Healthwatch in the East of England.³ Their work was driven by a concern that access to cancer treatment had been reduced significantly in the early stages of the pandemic.

Fortunately, at the time our checks were undertaken, cancer treatments had since resumed, although COVID-19 continues to impact on access to many areas of healthcare. We have focused on issues that have been raised with us from members of the public in North Yorkshire, and matters that have been highlighted in our previous research projects.

Our volunteers found many great examples of GP websites providing crucial information and support for members of the public in North Yorkshire, but also examples of areas in need of improvement. Healthwatch North Yorkshire offers to work with GP practices and their Patient Participation Groups to continue to improve their websites for use by their patients and members of the public in North Yorkshire.



¹ This information taken from a number of the GP websites reviewed during this project.

² The area covered by Healthwatch North Yorkshire excludes the city of York, as this is a separate higher tier authority area. The city of York is covered by its own dedicated local Healthwatch.

³ Healthwatch [Bedfordshire](#), Bedford Borough, [Cambridgeshire & Peterborough](#), [Hertfordshire](#), Suffolk, and [Southend](#).

What we did

We undertook a 'health check' of all websites of GP practices in the 17 Primary Care Networks (PCN) in the North Yorkshire County Council area – a total of 82 practices. PCNs are formed by GP practices coming together to coordinate provision of care and services at scale above that which individual practices can deliver. All except a handful of GP practices in England have joined a PCN.⁴ We chose to select from PCNs for practical and strategic reasons.

Due to the nature of PCNs, not all GP practices in the area covered by North Yorkshire County Council are in PCNs, and not all GP practices in the 17 PCNs included in the website 'health check' are in North Yorkshire. These PCNs are covered by four Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCG): North Yorkshire CCG; Vale of York CCG; Bradford District and Craven CCG; and Morecombe Bay CCG. CCGs are responsible for the planning and commissioning of health care services for their local area.

Six Healthwatch North Yorkshire volunteers undertook the health checks. The volunteers acted as 'mystery shoppers', in the role of members of the public.

The health checks involved asking nine questions and providing answers to these questions to reflect positives and areas for improvement on websites. Volunteers did not evaluate their own GP website.

We adapted questions developed by Healthwatch colleagues in the East of England to reflect current national circumstances and issues raised by our on-going work in North Yorkshire. We asked the following questions:

1. Is there a link to the NHS COVID-19 advice site?
2. Is there easily accessible, current, COVID-19 advice?
3. Was it easy to find out how to make an appointment?
4. Are there options of in-person, phone, or video appointments?
5. Does the website have links to self-care and support organisations for health and wellbeing?
6. Is there information about interpreter services and details of how to arrange them?
7. Was it easy to find out how to make a complaint?
8. Does the website contain current Patient Participation Group (PPG) information?
9. Is there information about or links to the local Healthwatch?

The health checks were conducted from the 30th November to 20th December 2020.

⁴ The King's Fund. 2020. [Primary Care Networks Explained](#).

Our volunteers were asked to answer the questions as if they themselves wanted to find the information on each website and as if it were their own GP practice. It was recognised that one volunteer might answer differently to another: this represents the variation that members of the public might demonstrate when visiting their own GP website.

Similarly, if a volunteer was unable to find information on a practice website – this represents a member of the public not being able to find the information they need. Such instances highlight a need for website improvement in terms of accessibility or clarity of navigation.


Volunteers were also asked to provide comments identifying positives and areas for improvement;



'Clear, attractive and coherent homepage design with use of colourful, clipart type images linked to key topics.'

'New patient registration form includes questions re need for an interpreter or other communication issues plus learning disabilities.'

'Not easy to navigate – especially menu which may not be apparent to some. Pop-up comes up throughout. Book Appointment tab prominent but limited information.'



Key findings

Good practice

- Some GP websites were very good, providing a wide range of up-to-date information and appear to have considered their patients as the main users of their site. Over a fifth (18 of 82) of GP websites scored positively in 7 or more health check questions.
- Most (87%) websites had links to official NHS or Government COVID-19 information, but there were a significant number of GP practices in North Yorkshire who did not have up-to-date and easily accessible COVID-19 information on their website.
- Most (84%) websites made it easy to understand how to make an appointment. However, it was also not always clear what types of appointments were available. The appointment options were often situated in multiple locations, potentially creating confusion for patients.
- Most (93%) GP websites provided clear and helpful information about self-care and support organisations to help people take control of their own health.

Improvement needed

- However, there were websites with many areas in need of improvement. A small number (12 of 82, 15%) of GP websites passed less than four health check questions.
- Very few GP websites had information about the national Vaccination Programme. Now that the programme has started, it is important that up-to-date information, detailing progress to date in respect of differing patient cohorts, be made available on GP websites. This could reduce the number of contacts made by anxious patients.
- There was insufficient support for interpreter service provision, with only a third (27 of 82) of GP websites providing information on interpreter services.
- Only half of all GP websites made it easy to find out how to make a complaint.
- Less than half of GP websites provided up-to-date information about their Patient Participation Group.

Summary of Recommendations

From our findings we would encourage the following actions to be taken by GP practices:

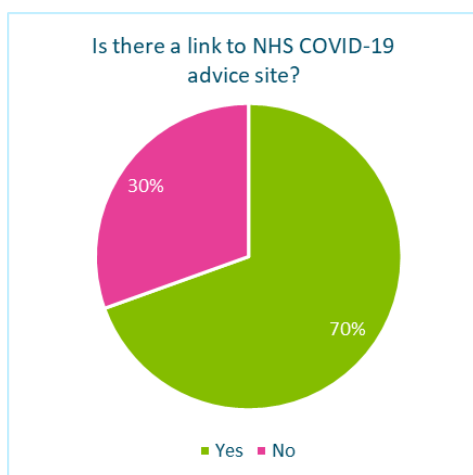
- Continue to work together through the Primary Care Networks to share ideas and examples of best practice.
- Conduct regular user experience testing to identify any difficulties or confusion associated with website usage.
- Regularly review information posted on their sites (especially on quickly evolving topics).
- Provide information about all appointment options available in a single section on their website.
- Provide clearer information regarding the provision of interpreter services, and whether these would be provided via phone, face-to-face, or alternative.
- Check translation software to ensure it functions correctly and covers a wide range of languages appropriate to the community they serve.
- Ensure it is easy to find the necessary information regarding how to make a complaint, preferably via a dedicated complaints tab. Reassurance should also be made that anyone making a complaint would not receive detrimental preferences when seeking future treatment.
- Maintain up-to-date information about their Patient Participation Group (PPG) on their website, including how patients can contact the PPG, and provide examples of how their PPG input has made improvements in their services.
- Include details of local Healthwatch and how they can help patients and members of the public.

Healthwatch North Yorkshire offers to work with all GP practices in North Yorkshire to improve the accessibility and information they provide via their websites.

Results

Q1. Is there a link to the NHS COVID-19 advice site?

Our first question was, 'Is there a link to the NHS COVID-19 website.' This link provides the official, up-to-date guidance on COVID-19.



Most GP websites (70%, 57/82) had a link to the NHS COVID-19 website when our volunteers checked. However, there were problems with these pop-ups in many cases.

For example, the pop-up would on occasion only appear the first time you visited the GP website – meaning that once closed, you were no longer able to access this link.

We found that the pop-up did not appear on some occasions if using Google Chrome, a significant issue. In other situations, the pop-up information was intrusive and kept re-appearing as the volunteer navigated the website, making it harder to use.

This problem indicates a lack of user experience testing on GP practice websites.

Recommendation:

Regularly user test your website to identify unexpected design issues such as these.

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Advice in your region

[England](#) | [Scotland](#) | [Wales](#) | [Northern Ireland](#) | [Ireland](#)

Get the latest NHS information and advice about coronavirus (COVID-19).

[Get a test to check if you have coronavirus on GOV.UK](#)

Symptoms

Find out about the main symptoms of coronavirus and what to do if you or your child has them.

Testing and tracing

Get a test to check if you have coronavirus, understand your test result and find out what to do if you're contacted by NHS Test and Trace.

Self-isolation and treating symptoms

Advice for people at higher risk from coronavirus, including older people, people with health conditions and pregnant women.

People at high risk

Advice for people at higher risk from coronavirus, including older people, people with health conditions and pregnant women.

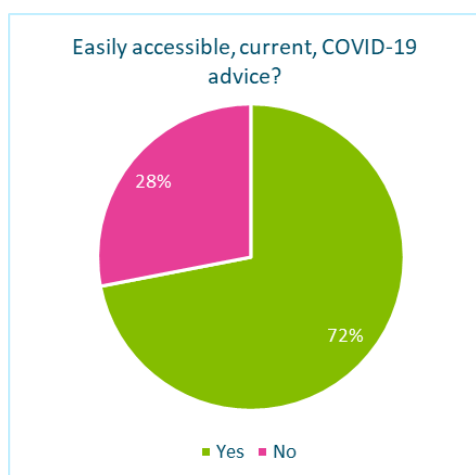
Social distancing and changes to everyday life

Advice about avoiding close contact with other people (social distancing), looking after your wellbeing and using the NHS and other services.

Image of the NHS COVID-19 pop-up, common on GP practice websites.

Q2. Is there easily accessible, current, COVID-19 advice?

The use of pop-ups to provide COVID-19 information was common, but there was sometimes a problem of the pop-up not always appearing. We therefore, additionally, asked if there was current COVID-19 advice on the main pages of the website.



We found that 72% (59/82) of GP websites had easily accessible, current, COVID-19 advice on their site (separate to a pop-up). Interestingly, 21% (12/57) of GP websites that used a pop-up did not provide current information on their website beyond the pop-up itself.

Combining websites that have a link to the NHS information site or have easily accessible, current, COVID-19 information, 13% (11/82) of websites were found to have no information. This is a worrying number of sites and compares very poorly with GP websites elsewhere.⁵

Some websites included in the 'no' category did have COVID-19 information. But our volunteers deemed the information to be not up to date or too limited:

'Limited COVID-19 public health information, mainly relating to surgery procedures.'

'COVID-19 advice under NEWS is dated March 20!'

There is more that could be done by GP practices to ensure that websites are providing up to date and easily accessible information regarding COVID-19.

What we liked:

'A news link, in red, gives easy access to updated COVID information.' –

Volunteer comment on Springbank Surgery, Harrogate.

Whilst after our period of data collection, we also liked the clear messaging regarding the COVID-19 vaccine that was included on the website of Sherburn & Rillington Practice, Ryedale.

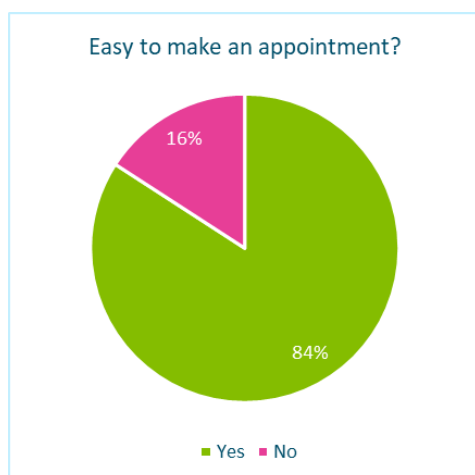
Recommendation:

Conduct regular information reviews (on quickly evolving topics, for example practice progress in respect to the national Vaccination Programme).

⁵ Healthwatch Cambridgeshire & Peterborough. 2020. [Giving GP Websites a Check-up](#). p.7; Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire. 2020. [Survey of GP Websites in Central Bedfordshire](#). p.11; Healthwatch Hertfordshire, 2020. [GP Website Audit: Finding Information during Covid-19](#). p.7; Healthwatch Southend. 2020. [Support for Cancer Patients during the Covid-19 Crisis](#).

Q3. Was it easy to find out how to make an appointment?

During the pandemic, the kinds of GP appointments available and how to access them has changed considerably, hence the importance of this question.



Our volunteers found that 84% (69/82) of websites made it easy to find out how to make an appointment.

Our volunteers found many good examples:

'Comprehensive information re: making an appointment/what to expect.' – Thirsk Doctors Surgery, Hambleton.

'Patient-centred perspectives taken into account – e.g. explicit text on advantages to patients of online services and information provided on practical advice provided on the best time to phone to make an appointment.' – Harewood Medical Practice, Richmondshire.

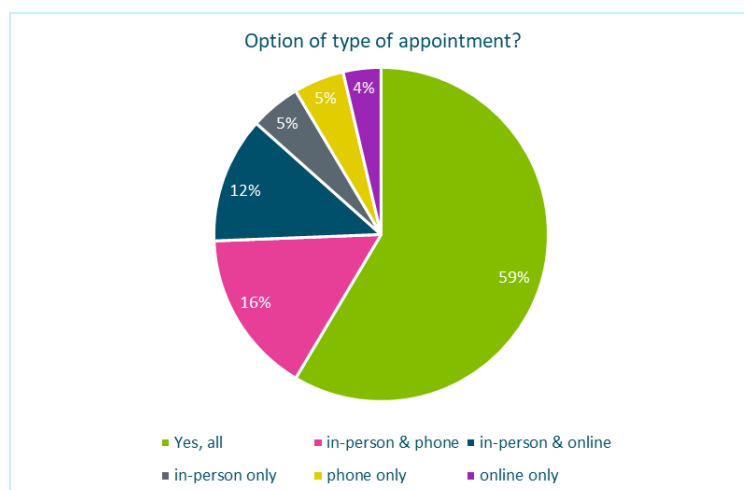
However, some volunteers felt that *'Booking info [was] hard to find.'*

What we liked:

The provision of a 24-hour appointment booking system at Posterngate Surgery, Selby, with the very clear instructions they provided on how to make an appointment was praised by our volunteers.

Q4. Are there options of in-person, phone, or video appointments?

In our most recent COVID-19 briefing published in November 2020, we highlighted that whilst there are undoubtedly benefits of phone or online appointments, for many people the option of providing in-person as well as phone/online appointments is important.⁶



⁶ Healthwatch North Yorkshire. 2020. COVID-19 in North Yorkshire: July – November 2020. p.8

It is important for patients and members of the public to have choices that best suits their needs.

Our volunteers found that 87% (71/82) of GP websites provided information indicating that there was at least two types of appointments available,⁷ with 59% (48/82) of GP websites providing information to suggest that patients had the option of all three types of appointments.

A disappointing 14%⁸ (11/82) of GP websites seemed to offer only one type of appointment. We did not instruct our volunteers to consider if this information was easy to find.

There were cases where different types of appointments were listed on different parts of the website. Due to the lack of clarity on many websites, it is possible that our volunteers were unable to record accurately what the practice was providing. In cases like these, it is possible that a patient might find information about one type of appointment and assume that this was the only type available. As one volunteer commented of one website:

'Confusion over which one from the three different 'appointment' options is useful. Eventually found the useful one on the homepage, but took some time to figure it out.'

This could potentially result in someone not booking an appointment they needed if they wished to avoid that type of appointment.

What we liked:

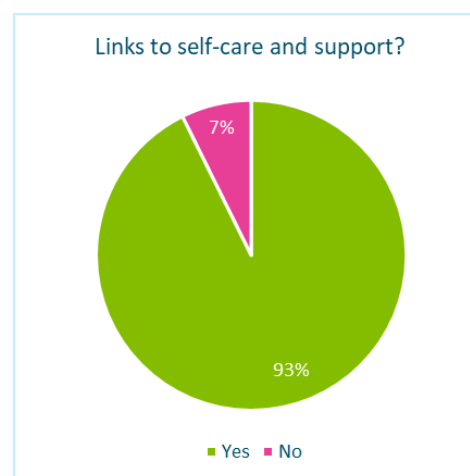
'I liked the helpful information for patients with the How to Do a Video Consultation.' – Volunteer comment on Scott Road Medical Centre, Selby.

Recommendation:

Include the information of all appointment options in the same section on the website.

Q5. Does the website have links to self-care and support organisations for health and wellbeing?

Many people want to know how best take care of their own health and to access organisations that can help them. With GP practices being able to see fewer patients in-person, this has become more vital.⁹



Our volunteers were asked to look for all information concerning self-care and support organisations.

A substantial 93% (76/82) of GP websites provided links to self-care or support websites. This is really positive and we encourage GP practices to

⁷ No volunteer recorded a website as offering both phone and online appointments, without an in-person option.

⁸ The cumulative total over 100% due to rounding.

⁹ cf. Centre for Mental Health. 2020. [Covid-19 and the Nation's Mental Health Forecasting Needs and Risks in the UK: October 2020](#).

place self-help information and relevant support organisations in prominent locations on their websites.

What we liked:

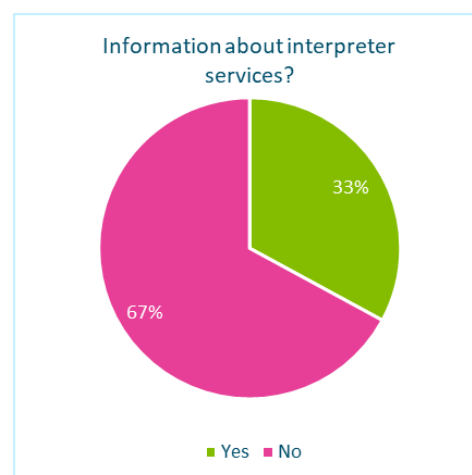
'The directory - Your one-stop guide to Services/Community Groups in and around your area - is a very good example of support information for patients.' – Volunteer comment on Sedbergh Medical Practice, Morecombe Bay.

'I liked the fact that there are links relating to Mental Health Crisis on the Home Page.' – Volunteer comment on Ling House Medical Centre, Bradford & Craven District.

Q6. Is there information about interpreter services and details on how to arrange them?

Difficulties in securing interpreter services in health and social care has been a longstanding problem in North Yorkshire.¹⁰

Information about how to access interpreters is more important now as GP practices are limiting the number of people allowed into surgeries, meaning family members who would normally translate are no longer able to do so.¹¹



Only one third (27/82) of GP websites provided information on interpreter services. Finding websites with good quality interpreter information was quite difficult. As one volunteer – who reviewed 27 websites – commented on one health check:


'The only site I've seen that has information re: interpreting under Appointments tab on Home Page – as

Non-English Speakers

These fact sheets have been written to explain the role of UK health services, the National Health Service (NHS), to newly-arrived individuals seeking asylum. They cover issues such as the role of GPs, their function as gatekeepers to the health services, how to register and how to access emergency services.


Special care has been taken to ensure that information is given in clear language, and the content and style has been tested with user groups.

Open the leaflets in one of the following languages:

 English

 Albanian

 Arabic


 Bulgarian

 Chinese (Cantonese)

 Chinese (Mandarin)

 Russian


 Farsi


 Bengali

 Croatian

 Punjabi

 Somali

 Gujerati

 Turkish


 Urdu

 Hindi

 Lithuanian

 Polish

 Portuguese

 Spanish

 French

well as Practice Policies, where the NHS guide is readily accessible in 21 languages. – Nidderdale Group Practice, Harrogate.

Where translation was included, we did notice two groupings:

- Informational fact sheets, written in several languages
- Page translation options

The first of these followed a similar format across the websites. The fact sheets would be made available in an area for ‘Non– English Speakers’, linking to materials intended for “newly -arrived individuals seeking asylum”. These were usually made available via a ‘New Patient’ tab.

These fact sheets inform the reader that they should inform the receptionist they need an interpreter when they book an appointment.

It is concerning that users have to first navigate websites in English to discover factsheets in other languages. Additionally, these links did not always work. Sometimes they would direct to a GOV.uk archived page.

Some websites provided the option of a translation tool. This would translate the website, using an automated programme such as Google translate.

Our volunteers found that these functions did not always work, or provided only a very limited translation range. For example, one website provided translation into only English, French, or German.

What we liked:

‘Accessible Information tab includes interpreting and this can be translated into a range of languages - also includes other forms of communication plus poster regarding this.’ – Volunteer comment on Kingswood Surgery, Harrogate.

‘New Patient leaflet mentions Language Line plus web-cam based sign language.’ – Volunteer comment on Nidderdale Group Practice, Harrogate.

Recommendations:

Provide clearer information regarding the provision of interpreter services.

Also, include information on whether these would be provided via phone, face-to-face, or either.

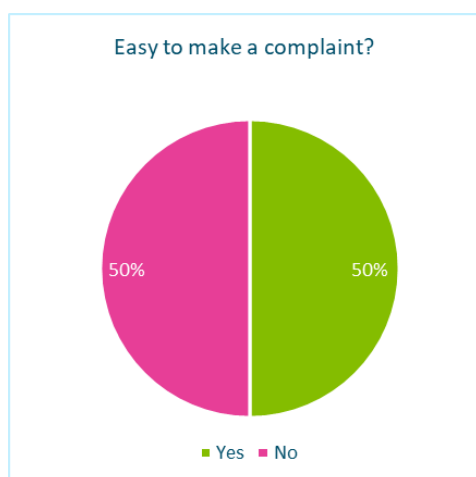
Finally, regularly check the use of translation software to make sure it functions, and covers a wide range of languages.



Q7. Was it easy to find out how to make a complaint?

In general, GP practices in North Yorkshire do a great job. We hear lots of positive feedback about GP practices in North Yorkshire through the #BecauseWeAllCare survey.¹²

However, sometimes things do not go as they should, and someone may feel the need to make a complaint. In these cases, it should be easy to find out how to make a complaint, and to understand how it will be handled.



Our volunteers found 50% (41/82) of the GP websites checked made it easy to find out how to make a complaint.

On some GP websites information on making a complaint was not particularly easy to find. With information on how to make a complaint being located elsewhere to where it would be expected. Of these, they would provide contact information asking for comments and suggestions in the 'Contact us' section of the website, but then state:

'Please only use this form for comments about the practice and

suggestions as to how we can improve our service to you. ...official complaints cannot be dealt with via this form.'

How a complaint could be made was not mentioned. Often the complaint procedures would be located in the practice policies area of the website and would involve the person wanting to make the complaint being directed to speak to a (non-named) member of staff.

What we liked:

We liked North House Surgery Harrogate, for providing a specific complaints tab which included information regarding a complaints advocacy service.

Recommendation:

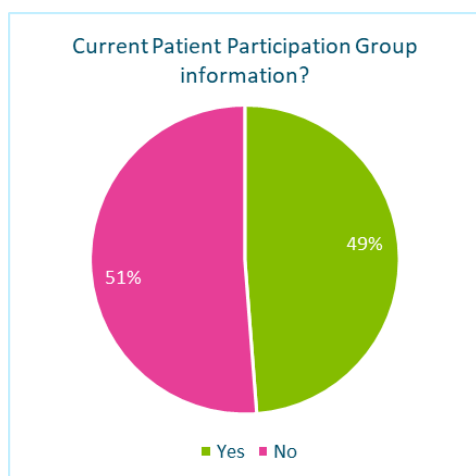
Ensure it is easy for people to make a complaint – ideally in a bespoke 'complaints' page, easily navigable from the home page of the website. Reassurance should also be made that anyone making a complaint would not receive detrimental preferences when seeking future treatment.

Q8. Does the website contain current Patient Participation Group information?

The involvement of patients and the public should be central in the design of services. Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) are a means of GP practices hearing from their patients about the good and bad services they are receiving. PPGs are also a requirement of practice contracts.

Our volunteers were asked to consider

the quality of information regarding the PPG and if there was information about how the PPG was operating during COVID-19 restrictions.



Only 49% (40/82) of GP websites were found to have current information about their PPG. This low figure was mainly due to the lack of updates around how a practice's PPG was operating during the current climate.

Our volunteers also noted that information regarding PPGs were lacking. For example, very few included the terms of reference for the PPG, and rarely were names of members or who to contact provided.

Additionally, we found that some GP websites emphasised Patient Reference Groups in place of a PPG – where patients would be encouraged to sign up to be contacted electronically to answer survey questions from time-to-time. A survey has its uses, especially if a PPG has had problems in gaining enough participation. However, collecting survey data is not the same as holding regular meaningful dialogue between the service and its patients.

What we liked:

Sherburn Group Practice, Selby, provided a form for patients to be able to provide feedback to their PPG. Addingham Surgery, Bradford & Craven District, was a very good example of providing PPG information, including names of members, accessed via a Patient Group tab.

Recommendation:

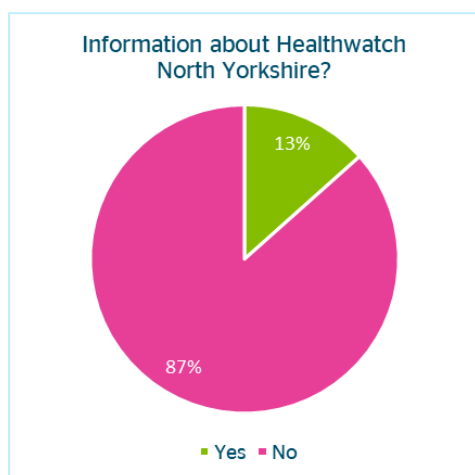
Maintain up-to-date information about your PPG on the website, including how patients can contact the PPG directly, and provide examples of how their PPG has helped to make improvements in their services.

Q9. Is there information about or links to the local Healthwatch?

As the independent champion for people using local health and social care services, Healthwatch North Yorkshire plays an important role in representing patients and the public voice.

Healthwatch North Yorkshire also acts as a central point for signposting members of the public to other health and social care services. We have also been hosting a ranging of information and support around COVID-19.

Our volunteers were asked to include any mention or image of the local Healthwatch. Our volunteers found that only 13% (11/82) of GP websites included information about local Healthwatch.



The combined number of GP websites that had current information about a PPG or provided a link to local Healthwatch was 45 (55%), indicating that GP practices need to do more to ensure that patients are aware of key organisations charged with gathering user views of healthcare.

Recommendation:

Include details of Healthwatch and how they can help patients and members of the public.

Next Steps

The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences have seen enormous pressure placed on GP practices across the UK. They have been required to significantly adapt ways of working within very short time scales. Times like this present challenges but also opportunities. GP practices have had to work much harder with often reduced workforces, delivering online and phone consultations in place of face-to-face, and Primary Care Networks have worked closer together than ever before.

It is in this context that we have undertaken this work, to shine a light on a simple, yet very important, area for improving patient experiences. Our volunteers found many great examples of GP websites providing crucial information and support for members of the public in North Yorkshire, but also examples of areas in need of improvement.

Healthwatch North Yorkshire will disseminate our findings to all the GP practices involved in this study, and we will seek to work with PCNs and PPGs to identify ways of improving GP websites.

We offer to all the GP practices that we have 'health checked' an opportunity to discuss their results with them for their own website, and consider ways of making improvements where needed. We will be raising our findings with PCNs, and will share our report with the local Patient Participation Networks to feedback to their PPGs.

We will also seek to work more closely with PPGs, using our findings as a starting point for developing conversations and ideas for collaboration.

The issue of GP websites will be discussed at the Yorkshire and Humber Healthwatch network and will feed into Healthwatch England intelligence.

We will continue to gather feedback from the public regarding their experiences of GP practices more widely, and use this to identify areas of good practice and of concern.

An impact review will be undertaken in 6 to 9 months' time. We will conduct health checks on a smaller number of GP websites in North Yorkshire to gauge levels of improvement and measure other areas of interest that may be raised during our dissemination of this report.

Our Volunteers

Projects like this are reliant on the work of our volunteers. We at Healthwatch North Yorkshire are exceptionally grateful for the amazing work our volunteers do. Our volunteers raise awareness of the work we do in the community to make sure that local services are meeting people's needs. They gather people's views and experiences which we use in our reports, and conduct research for projects like this one. They are central to achieving our core purpose of putting patients' and the public's voice at the heart of health and social care.

Meet some of our volunteers:



I'm Beverley, I'm a postgraduate Public Policy student and a volunteer at Healthwatch North Yorkshire. I decided to become a volunteer as I believe the work HWNY does is so important in improving health and social care services. My volunteering allows me to make a positive difference working on projects I find meaningful, whilst also giving me opportunities to develop my own personal and professional skills.

I liked being involved in this project checking GP websites because with such a broad range of people accessing GP services, this work has real power for good in providing valuable insight from a general public perspective. I think it is important that GP services work for everyone who needs them, and this was a great opportunity to highlight what is going well and what could be improved.

My name is Ahmed. I have been volunteering with Healthwatch North Yorkshire for two years now as a health connector and community outreach volunteer.

I have been supporting as a volunteering because I like to protect our environment, support our community in North Yorkshire and to do something positive for them.

I liked being involved in this project because I believe that we can make change and we have the ability to improve many parts of this area. Also I have found it extremely valuable, important and it has given me extensive experience.



Volunteer with us:

Are you feeling inspired? We are always on the lookout for new volunteers. If you are interested in volunteering, please get in touch with Lada Rothstein: lada.rotshtein@hwny.co.uk

healthwatch

North Yorkshire

Healthwatch North Yorkshire is an independent charity commissioned by North Yorkshire County Council to carry out statutory duties.

The Healthwatch Network was established under the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to understand the needs, experiences and concerns of people who use health and social care services and to speak out on their behalf.



Share your views with us

If you have a query about a health and social care service, or need help with where you can go to access further support, get in touch. Don't struggle alone. Healthwatch is here for you.

Website: www.healthwatchnorthyorkshire.co.uk

Telephone: 01904 552687

Email: admin@hwny.co.uk



Find out more about us and the work we do

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