

Good Practice

A report into the accessibility of GP
practice websites

September 2021

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Recommendations

1. All GP Practice websites should be compliant with the NHS Accessible Information Standard.
2. All GP Practice websites provide the same information to a high quality standard.
3. GP Practice websites continue to provide COVID-19 information to the same high standard until it is no longer required.
4. Better quality of information around flu vaccination is required on GP Practice websites.
5. Information should be provided in a way which avoids complexity and decreases the need for navigation around the site.
6. Where possible, virtual appointments should be provided as an option to patients.
7. The out-of-hours extended access service needs to be brought into greater clarity on websites, detailing its function and how to access the service.
8. All GP Practice websites need to provide information in as many languages as possible.
9. All GP Practice websites need to ensure that information around social prescribing to local services is clearly signposted.
10. All GP Practice websites need to ensure contractual compliance with regards to their complaints process and information around their Patient Participation Group.
11. GP Practice websites need to include Healthwatch Manchester as a point of referral to information and signposting services.

1. Introduction

1.1 This report aims to present the findings from an investigation into the accessibility of GP websites.

1.2 Increasing digital provision within health care has been a long-term strategic goal for the NHS over a number of years, with the 2019 NHS Long Term Plan making a commitment that every patient will have the right to digital-first primary care by 2023/24.

2. Background & Rationale

2.1 Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, health care providers have moved many of their services online due to the enforced reduction of face-to-face appointments. During this period, Healthwatch Manchester was regularly contacted by people from across Manchester who faced difficulty accessing GP services through their websites.

2.2 Behind the increasing digitisation is an assumption that people are engaged digitally, have the physical resources to engage digitally, have the ability to engage digitally and wherewithal to engage digitally.

2.3 NHS Digital, which provides IT services for the NHS, has recognised that by increasing the level of digitisation involved in the provision of health care services, those people who are digitally excluded are at risk of worse access and worse health outcomes. Furthermore, the NHS also recognises that ‘people who have characteristics that are protected under the Equality Act 2010 (age, disability, race) are less likely to have access to the internet, and the skills to use it’.¹

2.3 In April 2019 Healthwatch Manchester published a report titled [‘Sticking with IT’](#), which examined the experiences of older people across Manchester when accessing health and care services online.

The report found that there is a need to reassure, educate and inform older people on an ongoing basis regarding access to health and care services using Information Technology (IT) and to address some of the limiting assumptions made around security and confidentiality. A need was also identified to frame the above in a tailored manner, that would address older people’s needs according to issues such as gender identity and ethnicity.

2.4 Local Healthwatch from across the region and the country have also conducted similar pieces of work looking into this issue, including Healthwatch Redbridge, Healthwatch England and Healthwatch in the Greater Manchester network. The Gorton and Levenshulme Primary Care Network also conducted a GP website accessibility review of local practices in April 2021. All these pieces of work are referenced at the end of this report.

2.5 At the March 2021 Healthwatch Manchester board meeting, annual priorities for the upcoming year were set, which included a focus on the barriers to health and care highlighted by lockdown and the need to engage with online services.

¹ NHS Digital, Why digital inclusion matters to health and social care, <https://digital.nhs.uk/about-nhs-digital/our-work/digital-inclusion/digital-inclusion-in-health-and-social-care>

3. Methodology

3.1 Healthwatch Manchester staff and volunteers devised a set of criteria against which the websites would be evaluated. These were derived in part from the Healthwatch Trafford report 'Access to General Practice in Trafford', but were tailored to include more criteria around access, with particular reference to the NHS Accessible Information Standard. Reviews were conducted on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being very poor and 5 being excellent.

3.2 The website reviews were undertaken by a team of three, made up of Healthwatch Manchester staff and volunteers. This was done to reduce the possibility of bias and to ensure a consistent approach when reviewing each website.

The reviews were all conducted between May and July 2021 and each review on average took 30 minutes to complete. In total, 83 GP websites were reviewed.

3.3 Each review was conducted using three different pieces of equipment: a desktop computer, a laptop and a smart phone.

3.4 Following each review, a mini report was produced which summarised our findings and was sent to individual practices.

3.5 The findings from the 83 mini reports were then analysed and merged into this main, more overarching report.

3.6 Throughout this process, Healthwatch Manchester engaged and involved a range of local stakeholders including Primary Care Commissioning, Our Manchester Disability Partnership and local general practitioners.

3.7 The findings from this report will be combined with those from the other 9 Healthwatch in Greater Manchester to highlight commonalities in key findings across the city region. The audience for the combined report will include the Greater Manchester Quality Board.

4. Key Findings

4.1 COVID-19 information

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Excellent (5)	3 (4%)	3 (4%)	77 (93%)

The standard of COVID-19 information provided was generally excellent. The vast majority of websites featured a COVID-19 information pop-up on the homepage and this provided patients with a good amount of relevant information.

4.2 Flu vaccination information

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Satisfactory (3)	39 (47%)	18 (22%)	26 (31%)

The overall standard of information regarding flu vaccinations was satisfactory but almost half of the websites recorded a score of either very poor or poor. This was due to there being either no information at all or very little. Even for those websites that did have a satisfactory amount of information, it was often difficult to find and not presented in a user-friendly way. For example, a number of websites had some information regarding flu vaccinations in a 'Seniors' section, but this was often difficult to find and inaccessible for those patients who do not fall into that category.

4.3 How clear is the registration process for new patients?

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Excellent (5)	6 (7%)	2 (2%)	75 (90%)

For the vast majority of websites, the registration process for new patients was very clear and visibly signposted on the homepage. For the 7% which recorded a score of very poor or poor, this was due to an inability for patients to complete the process online. For example, some websites had the necessary registration forms available online but requested that they be physically handed into the practice.

4.4 How clear is the practice information regarding opening hours?

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Excellent (5)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	81 (98%)

The practice information regarding opening hours was clearly visible on the homepage for almost all of the practices.

4.5 How clear is the practice information regarding its address?

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Excellent (5)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	83 (100%)

Every single practice had its address listed very clearly and visibly. A majority of practices also included a map so patients can see exactly where the practice is located, which we found to be very useful.

4.6 How clear is the practice information regarding staff members?

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Excellent (5)	3 (4%)	0 (0%)	80 (96%)

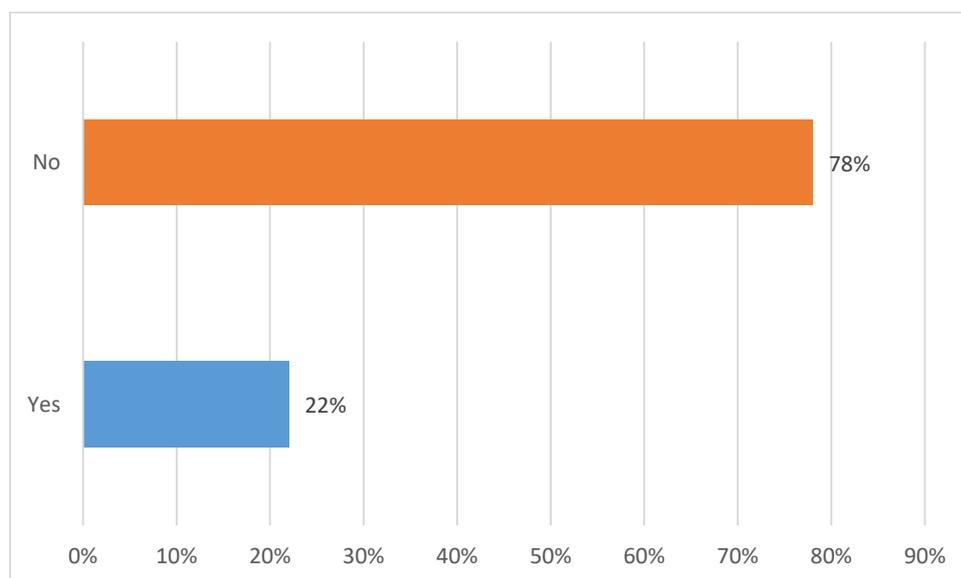
The overwhelming majority of practices provided very clear information regarding their staff members.

4.7 How easy is it to make an appointment?

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Good (4)	13 (16%)	8 (10%)	61 (73%)

In the main, we found making an appointment to be a straight-forward and user-friendly experience. The necessary page was signposted clearly on the websites' homepage and the process of booking an appointment appeared, generally, to be relatively easy. However, there is a number of areas where we found improvements were needed. For those websites that scored poorly, this was due to either a lack of the option to make an appointment online, with often a listing of the practice phone number to call, or a confusing appointment process. For example, a number of websites listed the different appointment options available but it was not obvious which one related to an appointment with a doctor.

4.8 Are virtual appointments available?



For a clear majority of websites, we could not find any information regarding an offer of virtual appointments.

4.9 What system does the practice use?

We could not find this information for 4 practice websites. One website used the NHS App whilst all of the others used Patient Access.

4.10 How would you rate the guidance on how to use the system?

The system guidance for both the NHS App and Patient Access is very good.

4.11 Is there contact information for patients who are unable to access the internet? (e.g. a telephone number)

Every single practice website had a telephone number listed.

4.12 How easy is it to cancel an appointment?

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Excellent (5)	13 (16%)	1 (1%)	69 (83%)

Generally, the process to cancel an appointment was easy with sufficient information provided for patients. However, for a number of different websites the cancellation process was either not mentioned at all, very difficult to find or did not offer the option of online cancellation, instead instructing patients to contact the practice by phone.

4.13 How easy is it to access the out-of-hours service information?

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Satisfactory (3)	22 (27%)	6 (7%)	55 (66%)

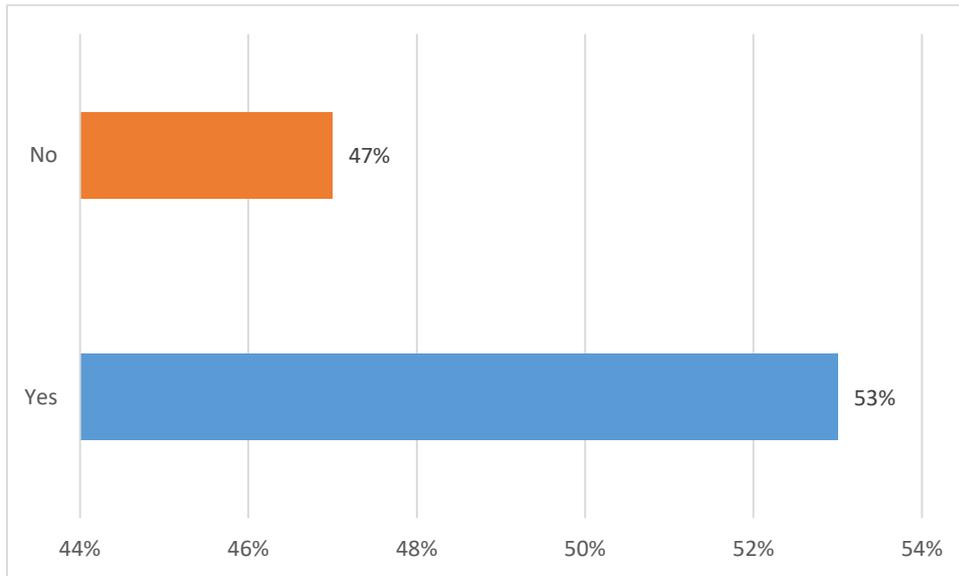
The standard of information provided with regards to the out-of-hours service was patchy at best. Even those websites that recorded a score of either good or excellent require a degree of improvement. Unfortunately, there was a number of practices that provided either very little or no information at all about the out-of-hours service. Even for those website that did provide sufficient information, it was often difficult to locate and could be easily missed by patients unless they knew exactly what they were looking for. For example, a large number of practices had on their homepage a graphic linking patients to a relevant external page. However, this graphic and the accompanying text were often small and therefore would be easily missed by patients who did not know what to look for.

4.14 How accessible is the website colour scheme?

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Excellent (5)	5 (6%)	6 (7%)	72 (87%)

The colour scheme on the vast majority of websites was absolutely fine with no problems.

4.15 Are there other language options available?



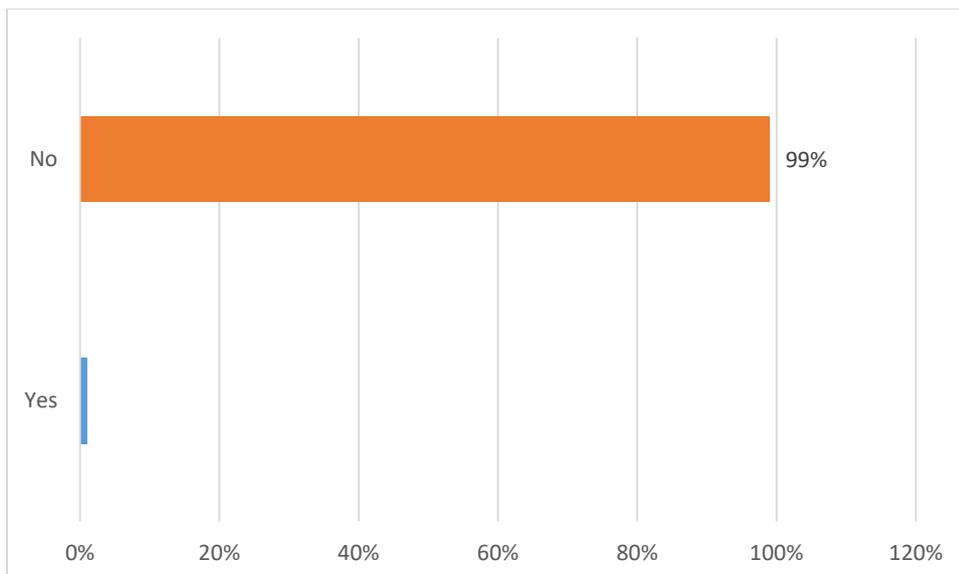
A majority of websites did not offer any other language options. Of those that did, a number offered very limited options and in some cases the function did not work at all.

4.16 How accessible is the font?

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Excellent (5)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	81 (98%)

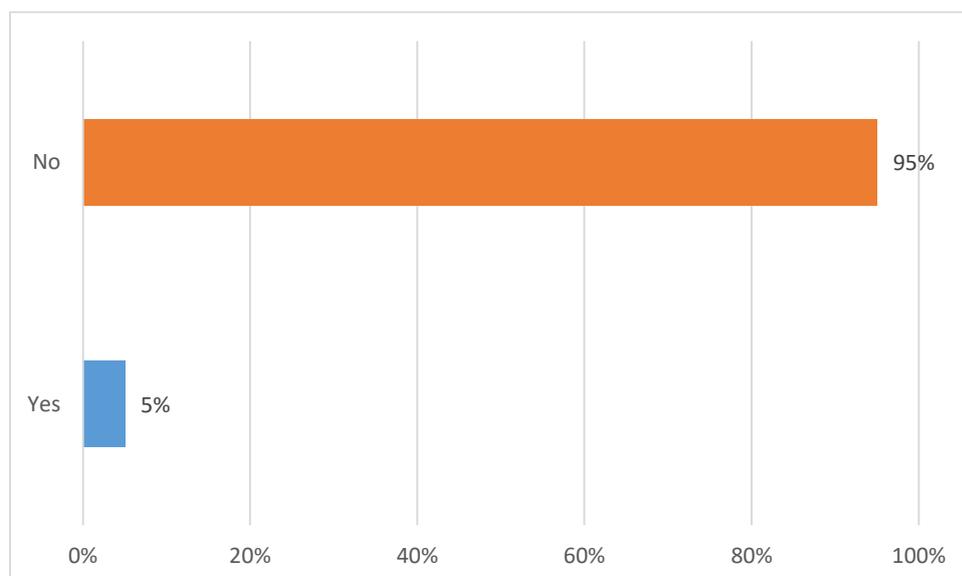
For the overwhelming majority of websites, the fonts used were accessible and we identified very few issues.

4.17 Are there EasyRead versions of text available?



We only found one website that offered any directly available EasyRead versions of text. The vast majority of other websites had an accessibility page that provided patients with an e-mail address to contact with any requests for EasyRead versions. If the request is accepted, patients have to wait between 5 and 28 days to receive the materials.

4.18 Is there any extra audio or visual support available?



The overwhelming majority of websites did not offer any extra, directly available audio/visual support. For those patients who required further support, the vast majority of websites had an accessibility page that provided an e-mail contact for any requests for extra audio/visual support. As with the EasyRead versions of text, should a request be accepted, patients have to wait between 5 to 28 days to receive the materials.

4.19 How easy is it to order repeat prescriptions?

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Good (4)	3 (4%)	11 (13%)	69 (83%)

In the main, it was easy to order repeat prescriptions. The overwhelming majority of websites had the relevant section signposted well on the homepage and it was easy to locate the necessary page. However, we did identify some issues with the clarity of information. For example, on a number of websites the process was complicated by the lack of the word 'repeat' on the relevant link to order the prescription. There were usually 5 or 6 different links on the page and adding the word 'repeat' to the relevant link would make the process clearer. Furthermore, on a number of websites the only way to order repeat prescriptions was through an 'Online Requests' section, which was linked at the very top of the page. Whilst the link to order a repeat prescription was clear once on this page, the lack of clear signposting to this section makes it likely that some patients would be unable to locate it.

4.20 How easy is it to access medical records?

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Satisfactory (5)	25 (29%)	10 (12%)	48 (58%)

Whilst most websites offered either direct access to medical records or a clear explanation of how to access them, overall it was certainly a mixed bag. Quite a number of websites had either no information at all, very little information or information that was extremely difficult to locate. Even with those websites that did allow patients to directly access their medical records, the relevant page was not signposted well and could be easily missed. A number of websites have published the necessary information in a format that is not user-friendly, often located in the middle of a very long page of text.

4.21 How would you rate the standard of self-care advice?

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Good (4)	16 (19%)	17 (20%)	50 (60%)

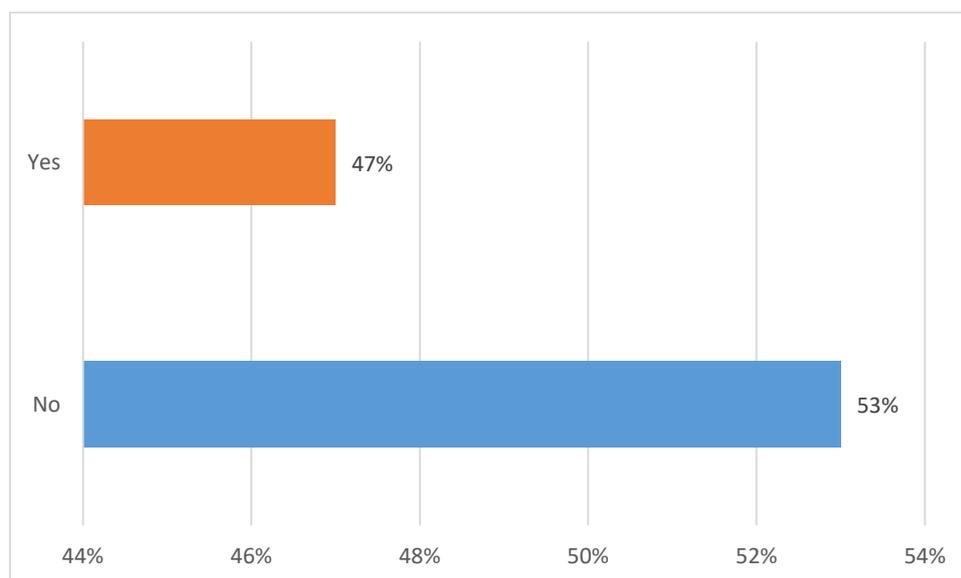
The general standard of self-care advice was good, providing patients with plenty of relevant information. However, quite a number of websites did not provide any information to local services and instead just directed patients to national, more general advice. A number of websites either did not offer any self-care advice at all or provided extremely limited information. We also noted on a small number of websites that sections were left blank or included text that had not been correctly formatted and so was unreadable. On the other hand, it should be noted that a good number of websites did provide quality information and direct links to local services across Manchester.

4.22 How would you rate the feedback process?

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Good (4)	19 (23%)	5 (6%)	59 (71%)

The majority of websites did offer a feedback process and provided an online form for patients to complete. However, a number of websites did not appear to have any feedback function whilst on others it was extremely difficult to locate. On a small number of websites patients were directed to the practice manager as the contact for providing feedback, but no contact information was provided.

4.23 Is there a complaints procedure?



The majority of the websites did not have a published complaints procedure. A significant number referenced a complaints procedure, or had a page heading to that effect, but did not publish this on the website. A number of them simply informed patients to contact reception or the practice manager for the complaints procedure without providing contact details.

4.24 If yes, how easy is it to find?

Average grade	Number and percentages of GP websites		
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	Very Poor to Poor	Satisfactory	Good to Excellent
Good (4)	10 (23%)	3 (7%)	31 (70%)

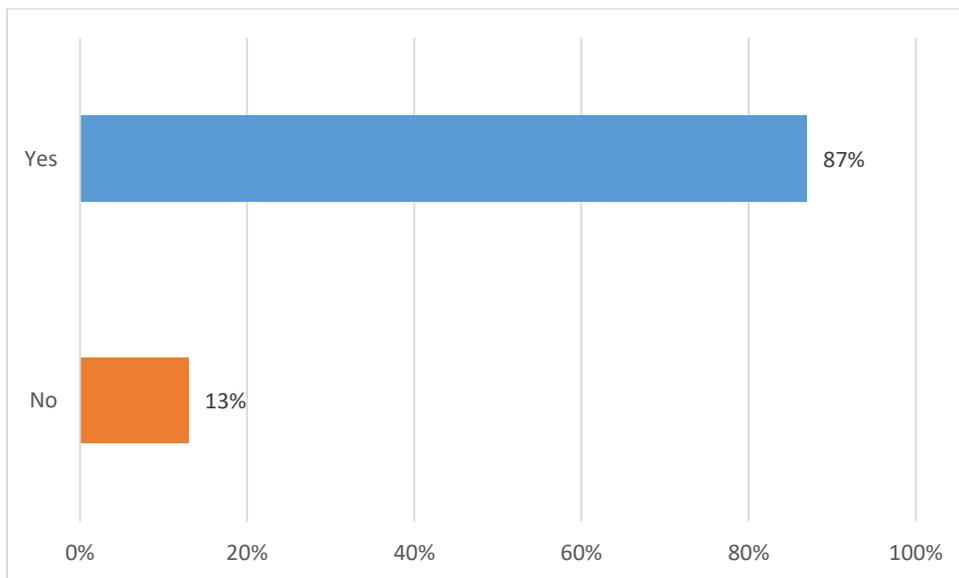
For those websites that did have a published complaints procedure, in the main they were easy to find. Most of the websites had a clear, dedicated complaints section which made locating the complaints procedure straight-forward. However, some websites did situate their complaints procedure in the middle of a long block of text, which was not user-friendly, whilst others did not have a specific dedicated section which meant that it was not easy to find.

4.25 Are there any British Sign Language (BSL) translations of content?

We did not find a single website that had any BSL translations of content directly available. One website did link through to a BSL translation company that would provide the necessary materials, but it unfortunately appeared that this facility ceased at the beginning of the pandemic in April 2020.

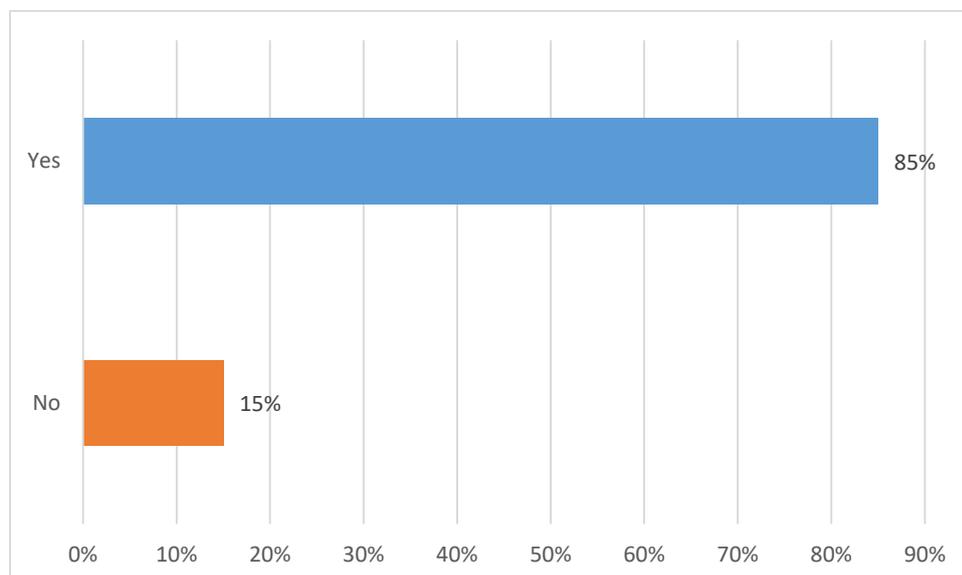
The vast majority of other websites had an accessibility page that provided patients with an e-mail address to contact with any requests for BSL translations. If the request is accepted, patients have to wait between 5 and 28 days to receive the materials.

4.26 Is there a Patient Participation Group (PPG)?



The vast majority of websites did identify the practice as having a Patient Participation Group.

4.27 If yes, is there contact information provided?



Of those that listed a PPG, a clear majority also provided some contact information for those patients who want to find out more and get in touch. However, there is also a need for an update to some of these websites, as the latest documentation (e.g. minutes of the previous meeting) was considerably out-of-date and in need of a refresh.

4.28 Is there any information provided for Young Carers?

Whilst a majority of websites had a section regarding Young Carers, only a minority of those linked to the new dedicated resource page on the Manchester City Council website.

4.29 Is there any mention of Healthwatch Manchester?

None of the websites had any information about Healthwatch Manchester.

5. Conclusions

5.1 GP Practice websites currently provide COVID-19 information to a high standard.

5.2 A significant percentage of GP Practice websites (47%) provided information around flu vaccination that was of poor quality. Therefore, patients are not currently supported satisfactorily in gaining the information they need around flu vaccination and the potential health risks.

5.3 In the main, the registration process was clear on most GP websites and so registration with a new practice this way is a simple process for local people in Manchester.

5.4 The same can be said regarding basic information including cancelling an appointment, opening hours, staffing and the location of the practice.

5.5 For most GP Practice websites, whilst making an appointment was a simple process, this was made difficult on over a quarter of practice websites through increased complexity. Where appointments included other services such as practice nurses, navigation became more difficult and so people may find this confusing.

5.6 For the majority of websites, getting a virtual (online by video) appointment was not an option as opposed to a telephone call, which applied to all, and this could ultimately

detract from patient experience. The offer of a virtual appointment provides patients with a greater degree of flexibility and ensures that services are as accessible as possible.

5.7 Where the practice website employed an operating system, patients were well supported with the guidance around the system.

5.8 The out-of-hours service, which historically has been difficult to access by patients, was also difficult to locate on most websites. As this service has been suspended throughout the pandemic its presence on websites may have led to confusion for patients.

5.9 The colour schemes for the majority of websites should not present barriers to accessing information.

5.10 Compliance with the NHS Accessible Information Standard was poor for nearly all websites. For sensory-impaired patients, or patients with a learning disability, this lack of compliance presents barriers to accessing health and care through GP practice websites. In many cases, patients who need extra support have to wait up to 28 days before receiving the required assistance.

5.11 As over half of the websites did not provide information in other languages, and where provided, such information was often limited to a small range of languages, the websites present significant barriers for many patients in Manchester.

5.12 There are no significant problems for patients in getting repeat prescriptions via practice websites although on some websites this facility was difficult to locate.

5.13 On a number of sites, access to information such as medical records, self-care advice and the feedback process was found to be lacking. Information covering these three areas was often very limited and difficult to find.

5.14 Of concern is the high number of practice websites (over half) that either fail to provide clarity on their complaints process or fail to provide mention of one at all. Also, where present, the complaints procedure was often difficult to locate and was not presented in an accessible format. Patients will certainly find this frustrating, and this lack of compliance with NHS standards is worrying.

5.15 Most websites provided access or information regarding a PPG. This was however often difficult to find and out of date and so many patients will struggle to add their voice to their local PPG through the website.

5.16 Young carers were in the main, supported through the practice websites although the majority of websites that provided support for young carers did not include a link to the new MCC resource facility.

5.17 Through the complete absence of any mention of Healthwatch Manchester it can be concluded that patients are not supported in accessing this service by the practice websites.

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Healthwatch Redbridge

'Week Spot?'
Healthwatch Manchester 2017

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Manchester would like to thank for their cooperation and help with this investigation:

Dr Faizan Ahmed

Mandy Bruder

Moss Side Health Centre

Dr Tariq Chauhan

Klaudia Donegani

Beacon Medical Practice

Longsight Medical Practice

Dr Abid Sami

Julie Savage

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