



Click and Connect

Improving the patient experience when registering for
GP online services

GP online services can cover a range of different functions, for example, booking appointments online, ordering repeat prescriptions and viewing medical records, test results and medicines. Many people find it more convenient to register for online services rather than having to rely on telephone or in person contact with their surgery. This has been magnified by the Covid-19 pandemic, due to social distancing restrictions.

We were contacted by someone who told us about the difficulties they had experienced trying to register for GP services online. They found the process complicated, particularly as they were asked to visit the practice in person with ID, in the middle of the pandemic. We decided to do some work to look at how people in Northumberland could register for online services at GP practices across the county.

Aims of the project

The aim was to investigate the process of registration for online GP services across Northumberland by looking at a sample of GP websites. We specifically wanted to identify what online services are available and how easy it is for people to find and use them. This includes what information there is on practice websites about online services and registration for online services. We wanted to identify areas of good practice and areas for improvement. Difficulties in navigating the registration process can limit the number of people who would choose to register and benefit from such services.



Findings

We looked at a sample of 22 GP practice websites (see appendix A) and have reported findings under the following categories.

Ease of access to information about registration and services available

We found a lot of variation between GP practice websites in terms of how easy it was to access information about online services.

Just over half (14) of the websites had clear links to online services on the home page, either as a separate tab along the top, or on the homepage.

On other websites it was more difficult to find the relevant information. For example, information could only be found by searching different parts of the website or by using the website search function.

On at least three websites, some links appeared to be broken at the time of the research. This affected our ability to access relevant information about online registration.

The process of registration was not always obvious on practice websites, even where there was a clear link to online services. For example, there may be a link to login to online services but little detail about how to register if you did not already have login details. This was the case on four practice websites who use SystmOne as their online system.

A small help button in the right-hand corner of the SystmOne login page leads to an FAQ guide on the system which would not be an obvious place to check. The FAQ guide itself was quite complex with a great deal of technical information included.

Other practices using SystmOne had the same standard FAQ guide but also had additional user-friendly information on their own website explaining the process.

Changes during COVID-19

For virtually all online systems patients are required to bring ID to the surgery to register. In addition, many websites that had limited information about registration on their websites told patients to contact the surgery/reception to obtain details.

We found no updated information on practice websites as to how that process had changed during the Covid-19 pandemic, considering the social distancing restrictions and limits on face-to-face visits to GP surgeries.

It is not clear whether online access registrations have been put on hold by GP surgeries during the pandemic or that patients, generally, would be much less likely to request registration in the circumstances.

Some additional information around this on practice websites would have been useful.

Information for those with different access needs

Whilst not specific to online access, several practice websites had information around accessibility for those with different access needs. These include clear tools to help people with different sensory issues to navigate the system, such as the option to increase font size, listen to audio or change colour contrast.

Translation services were also available on at least eight GP websites although on three sites these could not be accessed without first changing website functionality cookie preferences. It would not be immediately obvious this was necessary to access the translation services.

It would be useful to have more information on all GP websites to help those with different access requirements including sensory loss, those with learning difficulties (for example including Easy Read documents) and those whose first language is not English, including BSL.

Encouraging patients to register

We found that the most user-friendly websites were those that have obvious links to information about online access on the homepage.

They are also the ones that explain the process of registration clearly and make clear that online access was another or additional option alongside telephone and face to face access.

Where there was too much technical information, or information was very difficult to find or limited, this could discourage patients from registering.

On three practice websites there seemed to be more than one option for online services which could be off-putting or confusing when considering whether to register. Ideally, one system where people can accessing all services would be preferable.

Other considerations

The new econsult platform could sometimes make it difficult to navigate the practice websites as a 'pop up' can temporarily block access to the site.

This may be of particular concern to those who are less confident digitally. It is also possible that those unfamiliar with online services may get confused between the econsult platform and registration for standard online services.

Recommendations

1: A clear link on the GP website homepage to online services, either as a separate tab or user friendly 'how do I' or 'how to' tab which lists online services as an option. This link to include all relevant information such as how to register and the services covered so guidance is in one place rather than different parts of the website or via different links. A 'one click' system for obtaining information is ideal to avoid website users losing interest.

2: Clear information on how to register for online access rather than a general 'contact reception for information' message. Links to downloadable application forms with the option to print off if people have a printer or complete and send by email. Where forms are included, ensure links are working and ideally in a format which can be easily amended, for example, Word rather than PDF documents. Detailed information on what type of ID is required, alongside a caveat that this is flexible in cases of limited ID, would be ideal.

3: Provided there are means to establish consent for registration and you can be sure of the identity of the person registering, consider the ability to use alternative means to an in-person visit to accept patient ID for registration, especially where the surgery may already have access to ID from initial registration.

4: Use only one system of online services which can cover all necessary functions.

5: Where possible limit the amount of technical information patients have to consider before deciding whether to register as this can be off-putting. If technical information is included, for example, in the SystemOne standard guide, have some additional and more user-friendly information available for patients on the website.

6: Make clear that online access is simply another option alongside traditional means of communication and is not a replacement for those services.

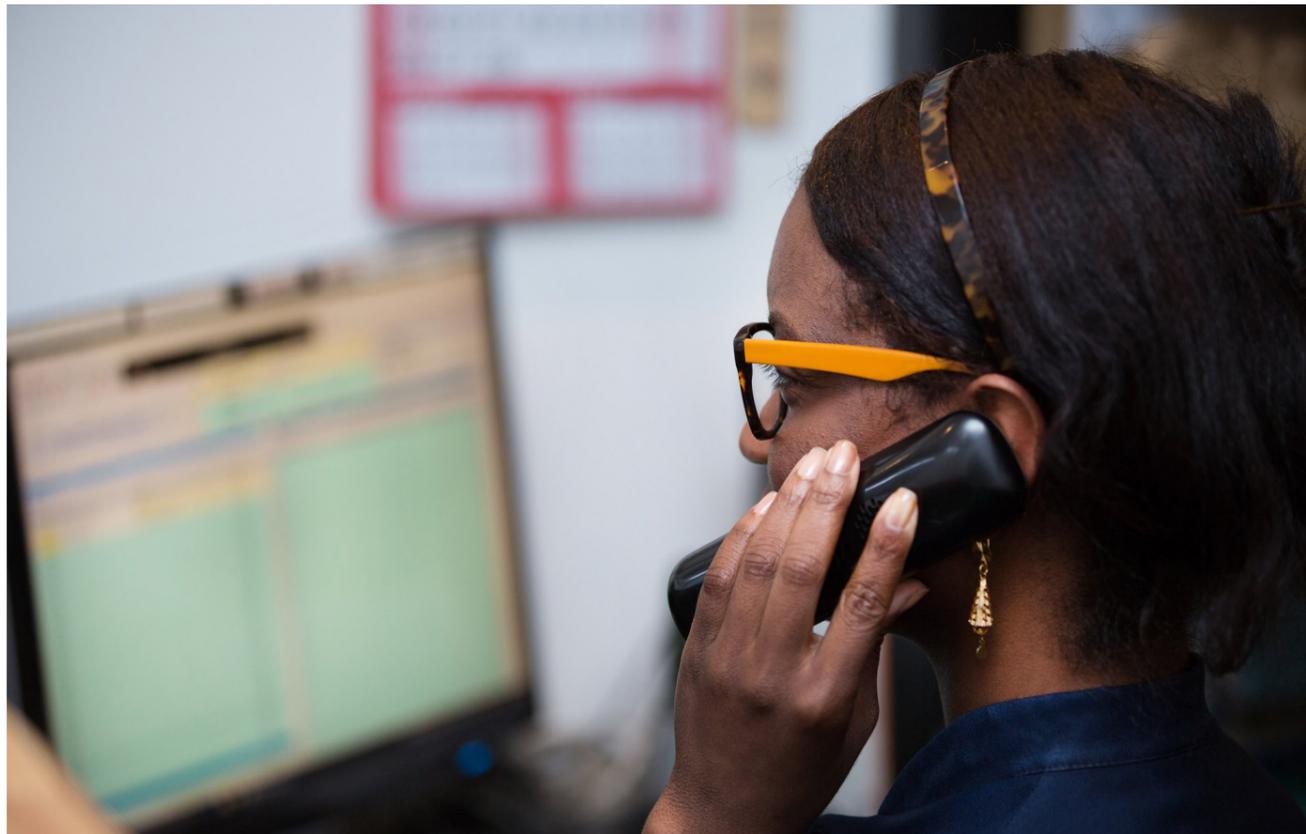
7: Information about online registration on websites to be kept up to date particularly considering changes due to Covid-19 pandemic. Website functionality generally to be checked regularly as practices get back to normal working.

8: Clear information on websites around accessibility standards. Easy and straightforward tools to help those with different access requirements including translation services and BSL to ensure websites are accessible to people with different needs.

Summary

We were prompted to research the process of registration for GP online services following feedback from a member of the public. We looked at a sample of 22 GP websites across the county and in doing so identified some potential areas for improvement and areas of existing good practice.

Central to the key recommendations is about making the process of registration as user-friendly as possible. These include clear links on websites to all relevant information on services covered and how to register, ideally via a 'one-click' process, limiting the amount of technical or complex information and making sure websites and relevant links are up to date, in working order and are easy to use by people with different access needs.



Response from NHS Northumberland Clinical Commissioning Group

We welcome the report from Healthwatch Northumberland outlining their research into GP practice websites and online services, in particular online registration. The research is comprehensive, and the findings are valid and timely.

Firstly, it should be noted that practices develop and manage their websites independently of Northumberland Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). However, the CCG is in receipt of Digital First Primary Care funding from NHS England, which is to be used to support Primary Care Networks (PCNs) develop digital and online technology to improve how practices interact with their patients. This may include website design and development. Discussions are ongoing with PCNs to understand the areas that they wish to develop.

Valens and Wansbeck PCNs have stated that they wish to develop their websites to include more links to useful information such as video content for common conditions and self-help information. The aim is to share the new format and website structure to ensure the same standards are applied to websites across the PCN where appropriate.

The CCG is also undertaking a separate piece of work to look at improving access by engaging with groups of patients to discover their views and opinions of the current process to access general practices and what they would like to see going forward. This will cover patients who are able to use online versions for access and those who are digitally excluded for various reasons.

Our practices will be very interested in the findings and recommendations in this report. We will actively encourage practices and PCNs to review the paper and consider the suggestions to make improvements to their websites and address issues with patient online access, where possible.

NHS
Northumberland
Clinical Commissioning Group

Examples of good practice

The most user-friendly websites were those with an easy access 'one click' link to online services which clearly explained services available and had a downloadable link to a registration form (**Corbridge Medical Group**)

We liked those websites which made it clear that online services were simply another option alongside telephone and in-person contact but also outlined the benefits of registration (**Glendale Surgery and the Gables Medical Group**)

Additional and more user-friendly information on registration for SystemOne alongside the more technical standard guide was beneficial to explain the process more clearly (**Forum Family Practice and Valens Medical Partnership**)

It was good to see easy to use accessibility tools and translation options on websites to engage with people with different needs (**Marine Medical Group, Blyth**)

Appendix A: list of GP websites

1. Bedlingtonshire Medical Group: bedlington-doctors.com
2. Belford Medical Practice: belfordmedicalpractice.nhs.uk
3. Burn Brae Medical Group: burnbraemedicalgroup.co.uk
4. Coquet Medical Group: coquetmedicalgroup.co.uk
5. Corbridge Medical Group: corbridge.gpsurgery.net
6. Cramlington Medical Group: cramlingtonmedicalgroup.co.uk
7. Forum Family Practice: forumfamilypractice.co.uk
8. The Gables Medical Group: gablesmedicalgroup.nhs.uk
9. Gas House Lane Surgery: gashouselane.gpsurgery.net
10. Glendale Surgery: glendalesurgery.nhs.uk
11. Guidepost Medical Group: guidepostmedicalgroup.nhs.uk
12. Haltwhistle Medical Group: haltwhistlemedicalgroup.co.uk
13. Humshaugh and Wark Medical Group: humshaughandwarkmedicalgroup.nhs.uk
14. Marine Medical Group: marinemedical-blyth.nhs.uk
15. Oaklands Health Centre: riversdalesurgery.co.uk
16. Ponteland Medical Group: ponteland.northumbria.nhs.uk
17. The Rothbury Practice: therothburypractice.nhs.uk
18. Scots Gap Medical Centre: scotsgapmedicalgroup.com
19. Seaton Park Medical Group: seatonparkmedicalgroup.co.uk
20. Valens Medical Partnership: valensmedical.co.uk
21. The Village Surgery: the-village-surgery.co.uk
22. Widdrington Surgery: widdringtonsurgery.nhs.uk

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