



# Information about services on dentist and GP websites during coronavirus (COVID- 19) outbreak

## A mystery shopping project

October 2020



### What was the project about?

Local health and social care services provided a wide range of information during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. We wanted to see what dentist and GP websites said about how they were working during this time.

### Why did we do the project?

We knew from previous projects that websites are an important source of information for people who use healthcare services.

In May we ran a survey to ask about peoples' experience of health and social care services during the coronavirus/COVID-19 outbreak. The survey closed on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2020. The full report is on our website. As part of the survey we asked people where they looked for information they trust. The results showed that websites of local organisations were important to people looking for information they could trust.

### What did we do?

We used a mystery shopper approach to review dentist and GP websites. We looked to see:

- what information there was on dentist websites about how to get treatment when the surgeries had to be closed (in May)
- what information there was on dentist websites about how they were working when they could reopen (in June)
- what GP websites said about how they were delivering services (in July).

We looked only at websites. We did not want to add to the pressures on dentists or GPs by doing telephone mystery shopping during work hours. We didn't check out of hours telephone messages.

The results are based on reviewing each website on a specific day. We recognise that they might have been updated since then. The findings are based on our assessment so they should be viewed as an indication of what was available rather than an exact count.

## Information on dentist websites in May and June

We looked at dentist websites twice. The first time was when routine dentistry had stopped in May. We also checked each practices' NHS entry and Google Business entries.

**Google Business** is a service that provides rich information in search results for businesses. This information usually appears on the right-hand side of the screen. Some of this information is generated automatically but businesses can claim and edit data about their business.

We wanted to see whether the information on dentist websites reflected the NHS England advice. The [information from NHS England in this area](#) (updated on 23<sup>rd</sup> April) stated that:

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### ***Urgent dental care in the South East***

*To help limit the spread of coronavirus all routine NHS and private dentistry has stopped.*

*The NHS is continuing to provide urgent and emergency dental care. This is available to both NHS and private patients. If you have a dental emergency please call your dental practice during their normal opening hours for further advice. If you do not have a regular dentist, you can search for a local dentist on the NHS website at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk) and call them.*

*When you call, a member of the dental practice team will carry out a telephone assessment with you to assess your dental needs. They are able to offer advice or prescribe medication to relieve any pain or to treat an infection.*

*If the dental team believes that you need to be treated urgently, they will refer you to a local urgent dental care hub..."*

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We checked websites a second time when the Government announced dentists could reopen. We wanted to see what the websites said about:

- when the practice was planning to open
- what services it was offering
- how to make an appointment.

We also looked for information about:

- how patients (and the staff) will be protected
- any specific actions a patient is expected to take on arrival
- what to expect when visiting the practice.

Appendix 1 gives full details of what we looked for.

## Information on GP websites in July

We looked at each GP website to see what it said about how the practice was working in July.

This included:

- what information there was about making and having an appointment at that time
- what to do when visiting the surgery

- how patients (and staff) will be kept safe.

We also considered how easy it was to find this information on each website. Appendix 2 gives full details of what we looked for.

## What did we find?

Overall, we found that many dentist and GP websites provided clear and up-to-date information. A small number fell short of what patients could reasonably expect. This may have meant that these practices received more telephone enquiries.

### Dentist websites

We have given full details of what we found in Appendix 1.

#### Phase one - information on dentist websites in May

Overall, most dentists (41/49) provided at least some information about how they were working when the premises were closed. However, there was a mixed picture about the level of detail. Of the 41 we looked at in more detail we found that:

- 35 gave information about what to do in an emergency or if urgent treatment was needed
- 25 gave clear information explaining the situation with scheduled routine appointments and about the same number (24) gave a phone number to ring as part of the information itself
- 16 websites gave a date of when the information was posted.

#### Phase two - information on dentist websites in June

When practices were allowed to reopen, we again saw a range of information. We didn't expect all the practices would be the same because some may have been opening on different dates and would be working in different ways.

We saw some great examples of websites giving clear information. For example:

- one practice had a large white arrow from the homepage. This led to comprehensive information about how the practice would be operating. There were also pictures of the team in PPE so that people could see what they will look like
- another outlined the seven steps it had taken to keep patients safe at their surgery.

Of the 47 we looked at:

- 21 gave details of when the practice would be opening or moving to the next stage of opening. A further eight gave information that implied they were opening, or it was unclear
- about 60% (28) had information about what services would be available
- about 45% (21) gave information about how patients (and the staff) will be protected and the same number mentioned the actions patients were expected to take on arrival. About 19 said what to expect when visiting the practice
- nine gave a date when the information was posted.

Although it wasn't the focus of our project, we did note that some dentists didn't have up to date information on the NHS website.

## Information on GP websites

We reviewed 50 GP websites. We looked for information about a range of services that may have been provided by a GP. Full details of what we found are in Appendix 2.

### Making and having an appointment at this time

As we anticipated, different practices had different arrangements in place for making appointments. We looked to see if it was clear what to do.

We found that:

- 68% of websites (34) explained that patients would be triaged over the phone first or this was implied by the information provided. A similar number (33) said (or implied) that patients would be offered a telephone (or video) appointment
- 44% (22) said something about how they'll decide if a patient needed a face to face appointment.

A few websites gave clear information about whether the online booking system was available at the time. Some explained that the system would allow only telephone appointments to be made.

For example one website said:

“Online booking of appointments has been suspended on advice from NHS England. This is because we need to triage all appointments to mitigate the risks associated with potentially infected patients attending the Practice. To book an appointment please telephone the surgery.”

However, for over half it wasn't really clear whether the online system should be used. One reason was that the information on the online booking page (linked from the home page) looked as though it was 'business as usual'. We recognise that clearer information may have been given once a patient logged onto the system but we couldn't check this.

### What you should do when visiting the surgery

We recognise that practices will be providing information to people when a face to face appointment is confirmed. From the information on the websites we saw that:

- 32 mentioned the need to wear a face covering or encouraged them to be worn. There was some variation in the advice about who should wear one
- about 20% specifically mentioned what patients should do when arriving at the surgery. A few websites explained how patients (and staff) will be kept safe. This included how the surgery /waiting area will be arranged, how the surgery will be cleaned and what the medical staff will be wearing.

One good example said:

“Attending Surgery. If you are asked to come to the surgery please do the following:

- Confirm you have no COVID 19 symptoms - call if you think you have.
- On arrival press the intercom button to say you have arrived.
- Wait in your car (or outside) and the clinician will come to you.
- Wear a face mask.
- We will check your temperature.”

Another example was:

“There are clear posters on the doors for patients who arrive with instructions on what to do. One of our team will approach the entrance wearing protective equipment and ask why you are attending, they will also screen you for fever and/or new cough before allowing entry, and only expected patients will be allowed into the building.”

### **Whether there's anything different about getting a (repeat) prescription at this time**

Half the websites (25) had information about changes to getting a (repeat) prescription at that time.

### **How routine procedures are being done at this time**

We found that a small number of websites that specifically mentioned what was happening with various routine procedures (eg blood tests, vaccinations, routine injections antenatal, postnatal or baby check-ups and referrals). Some websites gave general information about services that had been cancelled while others provided reassurance that the practice would continue to see patients when necessary.

### **How easy was it to find the information?**

We saw some great examples of websites where the changes to services information were on the homepage or clearly labelled on a specific page with all the key details one or two clicks away.

We recognise that GPs had different ways of working so some services may have continued as usual. However, many websites looked unchanged (apart from the homepage) so if someone accessed information using the tabs or drop-down menus it looked as though the services were being delivered as usual.

### **Date when the website was updated**

We found that many websites had updates or news items with the date they were posted clearly shown (for example to highlight the new requirement to wear face coverings). However, a couple had prominent posts with March dates on the homepage. Some websites gave a date the site was updated but this was generally small and in an inconspicuous place on the homepage.

In our view, clearly dated advice or information about changes provided reassurance that the rest of the website was up to date.

## Our conclusions

In this project we looked at dentist and GP websites to see what they said about how services were being delivered. We didn't review the advice about coronavirus/COVID-19 itself. However we noted that both dentist and GP websites used helpful 'pop up' notices to give key COVID-19 information.

We know that dentists and GPs used a range of ways to keep in touch with their patients. For example, dentists telephoned patients (to cancel routine appointments) and used social media such as Facebook to keep patients up to date. Similarly, GPs sent messages to patients via texts and apps (such as MJOG) or used social media. We didn't look at these sources of information.

We saw some great examples of websites that provided clear information about services. We also found websites where it wasn't easy to see how the practice was operating or where it looked as though the way services were being delivered as usual. A few didn't seem to mention COVID-19 arrangements at all.

We welcome the approach taken by many practices of having all the key information in one place. This was often on the homepage or one page away. This is a helpful way to draw peoples' attention to important changes.

We appreciate that the way services are being delivered may have changed since we looked at these websites. We also recognise that each practice will have its own priorities, may offer a different range of services, and have different processes in place.

We know from another project that people look to the websites of local organisations for trusted information. This suggests that more patients could be encouraged to use websites for service information (eg via links in texts, on social media or telephone messages). This could help free the telephones for those without access to the internet.

We have therefore made recommendations aimed at improving the way websites present changes to services. We also wanted to make sure patients know that websites give up-to-date information.

## Our recommendations for dentists

Based on these findings we recommend that NHS England and NHS Improvement South East work with Buckinghamshire Local Dental Committee to:

- encourage dentists to make more use of their websites to provide clear information to patients.

We recommend that during the current situation the following information should be on the homepage (or in one place clearly labelled from the homepage):

- how the practice is handling routine appointments (eg if patients will be contacted with a rescheduled appointment)
- what to do in an emergency or if urgent treatment is needed
- how patients will be protected and what to expect when visiting the surgery as well as any actions a patient is expected to take on arrival
- a prominent date when the website is updated to reassure patients that it's up to date.

We didn't look in detail at dentist NHS entries but we did note that some were not up to date. We would encourage dentists to update their NHS entry so patients can find out who currently offers NHS services.

## Our recommendations for GPs

Based on these findings we recommend that the CCG, with FedBucks and Medicas, encourage all GPs to:

- provide key information on the homepage (or in one place clearly labelled from the homepage) under a heading such as "How we're working at this time"
- include links to advice or include generic information provided by others (rather than producing their own text) to reduce the need to keep updating
- include a prominent date when web pages are updated to reassure patients that it's up to date.

We recommend that this information should:

- explain what services have changed and how
- summarise what services are still being delivered as usual (and therefore the information on the rest of the website still applies)
- explain how patients will be protected and what to expect when visiting the surgery as well as any actions a patient is expected to take on arrival.

Our [open and shut report](#), published just before the coronavirus outbreak, reviewed the way surgery websites informed patients about getting GP appointments at different times. It called for the key messages to be simplified and put in one place. It also recommended that Bucks CCG should offer template wording about appointment times for websites.

We consider the same points apply to coronavirus/COVID-19 related messaging on websites. For example, there could be standard wording about who should wear face coverings when visiting the surgery.

## Acknowledgements

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## Disclaimer

Please note this report gives a summary what we saw on websites on a specific day. We recognise that information may have been updated since then.

## Appendix 1 - Dentist mystery shopping

### What we looked for on dentist websites

#### First phase questions

- Does the Google entry say anything about how to access to dental treatment during this time?
- Does the NHS website entry say anything about access to dental treatment during this time?
- Does the practice website say anything about access to dental treatment during this time?

We looked to see whether the website:

- gave info about how the practice is working (or not) during Covid-19
- said what is happening about scheduled routine appointments
- said what to do in an emergency/ if urgent treatment is needed
- gave a phone number to ring (in the information itself) during office hours
- gave the date the information was posted and, if 'yes' what that date was.

#### Second phase questions

Does the practice website say how the dentist will be operating at this time (since 8<sup>th</sup> June)?

Some examples of what we're hoping to see were:

- when the practice is moving to the next stage of opening
- what services will be offered (eg emergency only or not certain procedures)
- how to make an appointment (routine / in an emergency)
- how patients (and the staff) will be protected
- what to expect when visiting the practice/any actions a patient is expected to take on arrival
- a date the info was updated.

### What we found

#### First phase

We reviewed websites and google/NHS website entries for Bucks dentists between 21<sup>st</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> May 2020. We haven't included in this report:

- practices that provided only private treatment (as far as we could tell)
- orthodontic practices.

Of the 49 practices we included in our analysis, 41 had information about how the practice was working during this time. Of these:

- 35 websites mentioned COVID-19 arrangements on the first (home) page.
- two had the information somewhere else on their website
- two had information on either their Google Business and NHS website entry (under the updates section)
- another two had information on a Facebook page.

Eight didn't seem to have any information about their COVID-19 arrangements on their website.



We looked at the information provided by the 41 practices in more detail. We have reported what was on practice websites, Google Business/NHS entries or Facebook pages.

We found that:

- 25 gave clear information about what was happening about scheduled routine appointments. Two mentioned they would be offering emergency-only appointments
- 34 gave information about what to do in an emergency/ if urgent treatment is needed. Two of these mentioned specific hours. The rest didn't have any information or it was unclear or non-specific
- 24 gave a phone number to ring as part of in the information itself. Others gave a number to ring elsewhere on the webpage or it wasn't clear
- 16 websites have an indication of when the information was posted. This varied from 23<sup>rd</sup> March to 18<sup>th</sup> May (9 in March; 1 in April and 6 in May).

## Second phase

We reviewed 47 websites (including one Google Business/NHS website entry) again between 22<sup>nd</sup> June and 29<sup>th</sup> June. We didn't use the results from two others because they were reviewed outside this timeframe.

On the days we looked at these websites:

- 21 gave details of when the practice would be opening or moving to the next stage of opening. A further eight gave information that implied they were opening or it was unclear
- 28 gave information about the services that would be available. Of these: 8 said this would be emergency/ urgent treatment only; 17 mentioned a combination of emergency/urgent treatment first with others (such as cancellations, unfinished treatments, patients triaged in lockdown). One said remote triage would continue and another added that treatment would be offered where necessary
- 18 give some information about how to make an appointment (routine and/or emergency). Of these four mention emergency appointments (a couple give a phone number for emergencies for example) and one mentioned e-consultations slots
- 21 gave information about how patients (and the staff) will be protected
- 21 mentioned any specific actions a patient is expected to take on arrival
- 19 said what to expect when visiting the practice. This included one that said this would be given to patients when they make an appointment.
- 9 websites gave an indication of when the information was posted. One was in May and the other dates were between 1<sup>st</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> June.

Four practices didn't seem to give any information about how COVID-19 was affecting the service.

## Appendix 2 - GP website mystery shopping exercise

### What we looked for

The full list of all the information we looked for is given in Appendix 3. We also assessed how easy this was to find.

We wanted to see what websites said about how the practice was working rather than advice about COVID-19. We appreciate that the delivery of some services may not have changed or a practice may not offer some of the services we looked for. We are also aware that this is a snapshot of what was available when we looked and some will have been updated since then.

### What we found

We looked at 50 GP websites. All were accessed in July. Most were accessed between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> July 2020 (one was viewed on 7<sup>th</sup> July and another on the 28<sup>th</sup> July). We have described what we found under the main themes we looked for.

#### Date when the website was updated

When we looked to see when the website had last been updated, we found a range of information. We found that:

- many websites had updates or news items with the date they were posted clearly shown (for example to highlight the new requirement to wear face coverings)
- a couple of websites included prominent posts with March dates on the homepage
- a few websites gave a date the site was updated but this was generally small and in an inconspicuous place on the homepage.

In our view clearly dated advice or information about changes provided reassurance that the rest of the website was up to date.

#### Making and having an appointment at this time

As we expected, different practices had different arrangements in place for making appointments. When we looked at the 50 websites to see if it was clear what to do we found that:

- 34 websites explained that patients would be triaged over the phone first or this was implied by the information provided. A few of these practices were encouraging patients to use an online app for triage. We could also see that some practices were already operating a telephone triage service.
- 33 websites said (or implied) patients would be offered a telephone (or video) appointment
- 22 said something about how they'll decide if a patient needs a face to face appointment
- 11 websites specifically said that the online booking systems was unavailable at this time (e.g. via Patient Access). Some said online booking was possible with a couple mentioning that this was for telephone appointments only
- for over half of the websites (26) it wasn't really clear whether someone could use the online system or not. In many cases the online booking page (linked from the home page) looked as though it was 'business as usual'. One helpful example we found via a website's quick link to 'online services' led to the Patient Access page. This gave an update in red explaining that all online bookable appointments were for telephone consultations only.

## What you should do when visiting the surgery

In summary we found that:

- 32 websites mentioned the need to wear a face covering or encouraged them to be worn. There was some variation in the advice about who should wear one (eg all patients, patients over 3 or patients over 11). One said a mask would be provided and some asked people to bring their own. Some explained exceptions as well
- nine mentioned patients may have to let them know when they've arrived (eg by ringing the bell)
- 10 gave information about where to wait (eg in the car or waiting room) and/or how long in advance to arrive? For example one said "You may be asked to wait in your car should you be early for your appointment so please if you have a mobile phone, bring this along with you so that we are able to contact you to bring you into the surgery."

## How patients (and staff) will be kept safe

We recognise that practices will be providing information to people when a face to face appointment is confirmed. We found that:

- seven websites mentioned how the surgery /waiting area will be arranged. Such as a one-way system, spaced out or asks to use hand sanitiser
- five referred to how the surgery will be cleaned or mentioned 'strict infection control'
- six said what the medical staff will be wearing. For example one said "Clinical staff wear PPE throughout each consultation" and another said "All staff seeing patients face to face will be in PPE."

## Whether there's anything different about getting a (repeat) prescription at this time

We found that:

- 25 websites gave clear information about changes to getting a prescription. For a few others (six) it wasn't clear whether the website was giving 'business as usual' information
- seven websites mentioned arrangements that related to dispensaries. One gave a helpful summary about how different surgeries were operating.

## How routine procedures are being done at this time

We recognise that GPs will be working in different ways. Some services may have continued as usual so it may not have been necessary to highlight any changes.

We found that:

- six websites said something about what's happening with routine blood tests (either that they're continuing, cancelled or urgent ones only)
- one practice mentioned dropping off a routine sample (eg urine sample)
- eight mentioned what was happening with vaccinations. Six of these highlighted baby/childhood vaccinations. A further website said that travel vaccinations had been cancelled
- two mentioned what was happening with a routine injection (eg Vitamin B12)

- two specifically mention what's happening with antenatal, post-natal or baby check ups at this time. Some other websites refer to these clinics, but it wasn't clear whether these had been changed as a result of COVID-19
- four mentioned how referrals for other treatments are being handled at this time. One specifically referred to people undergoing cancer treatment or having symptoms that could be cancer-related.

Some websites gave general information about how services had been affected. For example some mentioned that routine appointments or clinics (for various tests/conditions) that had been cancelled. Others provided reassurance that the practice would continue to see patients if necessary.

### How easy it was to find this information on each website

We saw some great examples of websites where the changes to services information were on the homepage or on a clearly labelled specific page with all the key details one or two clicks away.

One common feature of many websites was that it looked as if the rest of the website information was unchanged. This meant that if someone missed the COVID-19 specific information on the home page and accessed information using the tabs or drop-down menus it looked as though the services were being delivered as usual.

Although we weren't looking at this, most websites had prominent advice about COVID-19 itself. Often this was via a standard 'pop-up' with links to Government advice or given as links from the homepage or other page. We did spot a couple of websites with either out-of-date information or that didn't seem to say anything about COVID-19.

## Appendix 3 - Table of questions for GP mystery shopping exercise

What does the website say about making and having an appointment at this time?
Does it say you will be triaged over the phone first?
Does it say you will be offered a telephone (or video) appointment?
Does it say how they'll decide if you need a face to face appointment?
Can you book online at this time? (e.g. via Patient Access).
Please add anything else about appointments.
Does it say you have to wear a face covering?
Does it ask you to let them know you've arrived?
Does it tell you where to wait (eg in the car or waiting room) and/or how long in advance to arrive?
Please add anything else about visiting the surgery.

What does the website say anything about how patients (and staff) will be kept safe?
Does it say anything about how the surgery /waiting area will be arranged?
Does it say anything about how the surgery will be cleaned?
Does it say what the medical staff will be wearing?

What does the website say whether there's anything different about getting a (repeat) prescription at this time?
Does the website say if there are any changes to the way you get a (repeat) prescription?
For practices with a dispensary or onsite pharmacy - Does it say anything about how, where and when to collect medicines?

What does the website say about how routine procedures are being done at this time?
Does the website say how/if you can get a blood test at this time?
Does the website say how/if you can drop off a routine sample (eg urine sample)?
Does the website say how you can get vaccinations?
Does the website say how you can get a routine injection (eg Vitamin B12)?
Does the website say how you can get antenatal, postnatal or baby check-ups?
Does the website say anything about how referrals for other treatments are being handled at this time?
Please add anything else that the website says are or are not be available at this time?

If you require this report in an alternative format, please contact us.

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