

GP online: Even better if...

People's experiences of GP online services

December 2017



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healthwatch
Surrey

Background

Since April 2016, a majority of GP surgeries in England have provided online appointment booking and online repeat prescription services, and now many also offer access to online health records¹. The aim of this is to give patients more choice and control over how they manage their healthcare (NHS England)².

The benefits of GP online services are outlined by NHS England, and include quick 24/7 access to appointment booking, prescription services and other health information, and empowering people to self-manage their care. Use of online services can also reduce the number of calls to reception, making it easier for those who wish to book appointments by telephone or face-to-face to get through.

However, the national GP Patient Survey 2017 (Ipsos MORI)³ shows that the number of people using GP online services is low. According to the survey, completed by over 800,000 people, almost half of people who responded said that they were unsure if their GP offered online access.

Similarly, in the Healthwatch Surrey report 'My GP journey'⁴ (June 2017), when asked about their use of GP online services, many people said that they were unaware of this facility. Many of the people we spoke to had additional communication needs, or accessed their GP services frequently for support with long-term conditions; GP online services may be particularly beneficial for these groups.

Introduction

Between 30th September and 6th October 2017, Healthwatch Surrey visited eight local GP practices as part of the 'Get Online' week organised by Surrey County Council, in partnership with the Good Things Foundation.

As a local Healthwatch we felt it important to use our experience of engagement with the public to make a contribution to the development of online services, raise awareness and understand local people's views on using these services. By talking to people in the surgeries we visited, and by sending out a short survey online, we heard about how people are benefitting from GP online services already, but also heard about some of the things that could be improved to make online access easier.

The following report presents key themes in the feedback we received and highlights factors that may play a part in people's use of GP online services which could be addressed in future efforts to get more people online. We also present examples of the good work already being done to give people online access to GP services, and examples of how local people are using these services.



¹<http://www.nhsemployers.org/-/media/Employers/Documents/Primary%20care%20contracts/GMS/2016%2017%20GMS%20guidance.pdf>

²<https://www.england.nhs.uk/patient-online/>

³<https://gp-patient.co.uk/SurveysAndReports>

⁴<https://www.healthwatchesurrey.co.uk/our-work/reports-and-papers/project-reports/>

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What's going well?

Many people who were already using GP online services said that having online access saved them time and helped them to easily manage their medication and appointments.

"I don't book online as passing by lots but I have diabetes and it's fantastic for looking up results before I come to the doctors, works really well."

"Yes I use it and access my medical records, I was cynical at first that it would work but it works for me and I take many tablets a day!"

"I use online appointments and it's brilliant. I have chronic back pain and waiting in a queue is agony. It's good to be able to get an appointment without having to come in."

"I signed up last week and was able to get an appointment really quickly, it was easier than calling up! I made my appointment in the evening so now I'm going to get my wife to sign up too."

Some people were also pleased with the sign-up process, saying that it was quick and straightforward:

"Once I had my log in details from the surgery it took a few minutes to sign in to my account and update my password."

"Easy to sign up. Initially I had a problem with the password - it didn't accept and had to get in touch with surgery for a reminder/reapply, but since then had no problems with anything."

Helen's Experience

Helen signed up to her GP's online services a few years ago after seeing a poster in the waiting room. She uses other online services for everything from shopping to paying bills and felt GP online services would give her easier access than having to call in to the surgery

"The receptionist gave me a form to fill in and I had to show photo ID - it was easy and took about 5 minutes. It then took a few days to process."

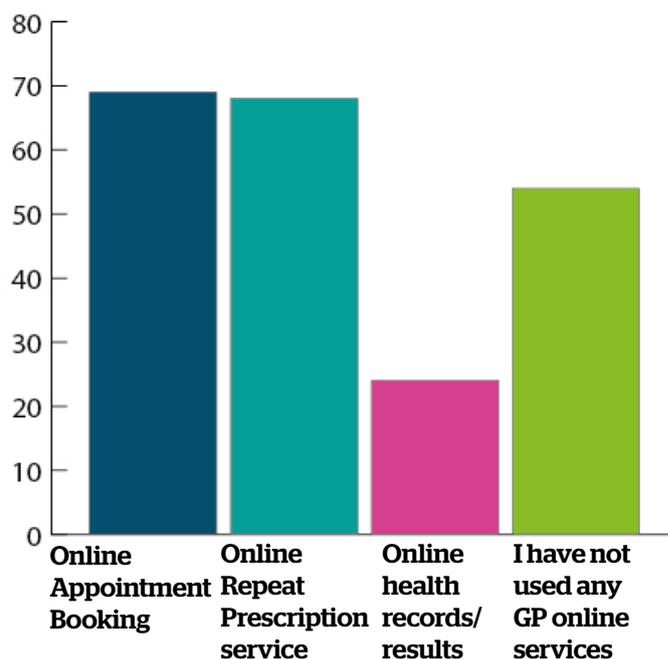
Helen now uses GP online services for booking appointments, ordering prescriptions and viewing

test results and health records, and says the main benefit for her is being able to log in to access her health information out of hours.

"As a type 2 diabetic I have regular blood tests, so being able to look at my results online helps me to monitor my sugar levels and spot any problems

Which GP online services do people use?

For the 162 people who completed our survey, the most used GP online services were appointment booking and repeat prescriptions. The least frequently used service was online health records and test results. These findings reflect those in the national GP Patient Survey 2017³. Keeping in mind the potential benefits of online access to health records set out by NHS England, particularly the ability to self-monitor the status and progress of long-term health conditions, the low use of this facility is an area that could be improved.



³ <https://gp-patient.co.uk/SurveysAndReports>

Why don't people use GP online services?

Awareness and information

Many people we spoke to said that they were unaware of the services that their GP surgery offered online, however said that they were keen to find out more. Of the people we spoke to, many signed-up during our visits, reactivated their online accounts or said that they intended to sign-up.

"I didn't know about online services but I will ask my GP and join asap!"

"There needs to be more information on what is available and how to use it."

"I'm a young mum, I wasn't aware of online services, but would definitely use for tests and prescriptions"

"This needs advertising in all forms! YouTube, press, social media. Advertising needs to be improved to encourage people and provide more



Raising Awareness

At all of the surgeries we visited, GP online services were advertised in some way; the most common way these services were highlighted to patients was through posters on notice boards in the waiting area and near reception.

Surgeries also promoted online services through their websites. In some cases members of the Patient Participation Groups were involved, highlighting the availability of online services in newsletters or offering their help to advertise within the practice.

At the Moat House surgery a member of staff acted in a patient liaison role, talking to new patients about the benefits of signing-up to GP online services and giving information on how to start the process.

Personal Preference

Not everyone we spoke to was interested in using GP online services; some people told us that they prefer to speak to someone in person, while others said that they did not use the internet regularly or at all. We also heard from people who were retired or lived close by, who told us that it was convenient for them to attend their surgery and speak to someone face to face.

"I can use the internet but I prefer to come in and speak to someone face to face who knows me...I don't like not knowing who is behind the screen. I'm retired and live nearby so it's easy to come in."

"No I don't like technology and I don't even have a mobile phone, I prefer the traditional way."

"I'm a bit of a dinosaur, I prefer to speak to people in person even if it is for prescription or results."

We also heard from people who said that they don't use their GP services very often, so felt that there was no need to sign-up for online services.

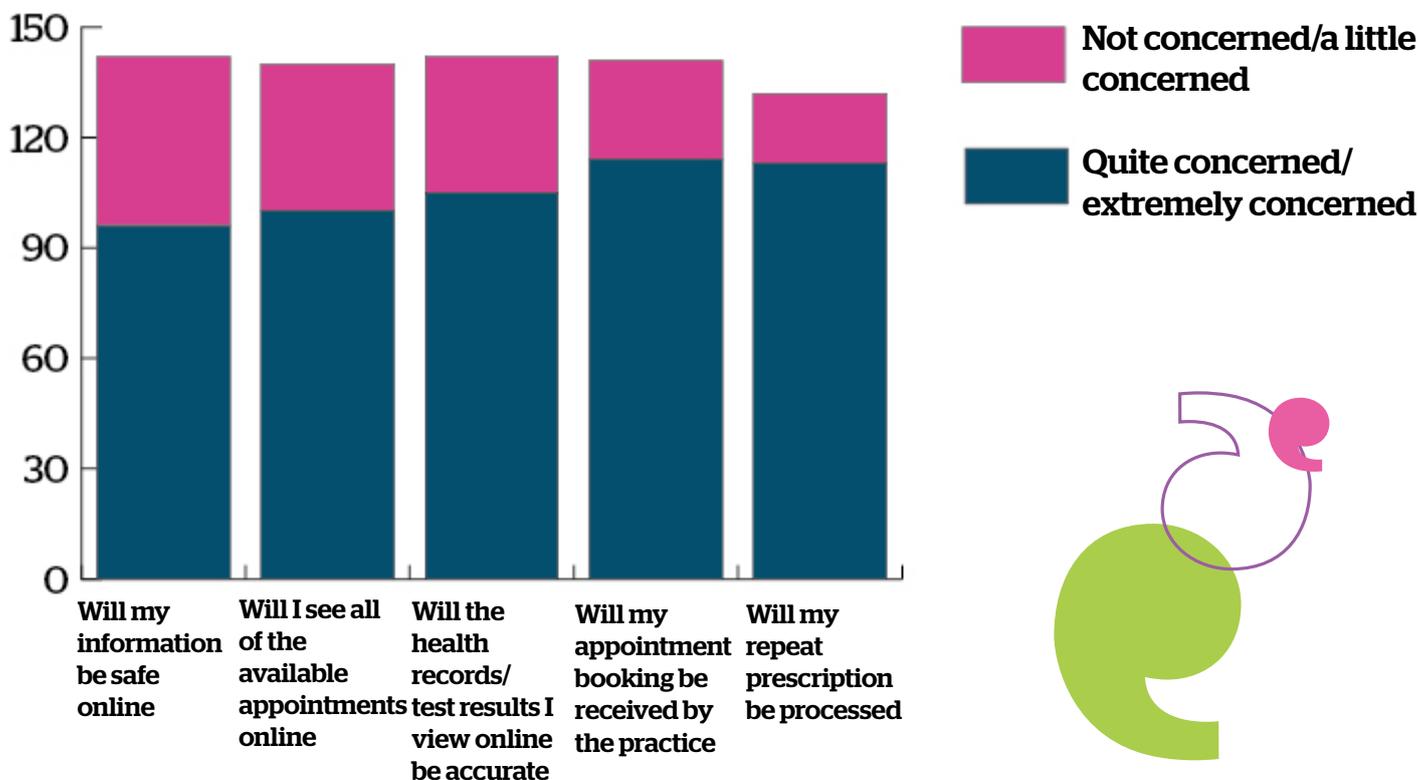
"I don't visit the doctor very often so haven't felt it necessary. I usually only need on-the-day appointments."

"I'm not often at the doctors, too young for it to be worthwhile."



Specific Concerns

We asked people what their biggest concerns were about using GP online services:



Concerns about Internet Safety

Some of the people we spoke to shared concerns about the security of having their records accessible to them online, and suggested that they would like reassurance that their records would be secure. Overall, safety of information online was rated as the top concern by the people we spoke to.

"I would like confirmation that the most up to date version of their operating system with firewalls and virus protection are in use."

"We do not like to use online services which require release of personal data or information."

"I won't use online, I distrust it totally."

These concerns are similar to those heard in the Healthwatch Surrey report on record sharing between services (If I've told you once, 2015)⁵ and suggest that, for some people, more reassurance is required for them to feel that their health information is safe online.

What could be improved?

The Sign-up Process

Many of the people we spoke to who used GP online services were satisfied with the services offered; however, there were many comments about the difficulty of signing-up. People commented on the complexity of usernames, and also said that if they forgot their details, it was difficult to reset their account.

⁵<https://www.healthwatchsurrey.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/If-Ive-told-you-once-Peoples-views-on-record-sharing-between-health-and-social-care-professionals-FULL-REPORT.pdf>

"Complex user name of random numbers - not memorable."

"I spent ages getting the codes and setting up all of my family but the first time I went to use it the system wouldn't work and locked me out of the accounts and according to their (rubbish) helpdesk, the only way I could get access was go in to surgery and start it all again."

"I find the password protocols too demanding so have to visit the surgery periodically to start over."

"Easy to sign up but if username is forgotten you have to go back in...email sign up would be easier."

"Tried it once, completely messed up and forgot the password...then the replacement didn't work!"

Appointment Availability

Many of the people we spoke to were interested in the appointment booking facility, however commented that the appointments available were often too far in the future. We heard that some practices release appointments in the early morning, resulting in a rush to login and book at that time. We also heard that, in some cases, there didn't seem to be appointments available with all GPs at the surgery.

"My only grumbles are trying to find an early appointment and not one that is about a month away, which means constantly checking it to see if anyone has cancelled. It would be easier if you could opt to have an email notification or similar. The surgery also seems to release a batch of appointments first thing in a morning too, so you have to be quick off the mark."

"Not all my GPs are shown on online booking sheets."

"That there were actually online appointments available - always says there are no appointments available."

"Future appointments only seem to be available at 3 weeks plus."

"The only thing is that they release appointments really early in the morning so if you're not on there by 6.30am you might not get one."

Type of Service

Many people we spoke to who did use GP online services said that they would welcome being able to access more GP services online. This was particularly clear in regards to the type of appointment available, with people suggesting that being able to book appointments to see the nurse or to have a flu jab would be useful.

"Use repeat prescriptions - but no notification built in of when prescription is processed and ready so still have to phone up practice to chase up and if find not done, have to phone up again later to ask again."

"It would be nice to be able to book online appointments with a nurse when necessary."

"It would be good to be able to book flu jabs online."

"Some of the test results are not useful. Last year I had an infection but the test didn't show the result, merely that the test had been performed."

"Can't book nurse appointments online which is frustrating."

"More forms available online - e.g. I recently needed some travel vaccinations. I had to pop in to the practice during opening times to pick up the form, then drop in again to hand it in."

Summary

Overall, the people who did use GP online services reported finding them beneficial in terms of timesaving and being able to monitor their health. This is in line with the benefits highlighted by NHS England. However, many people expressed frustration at the availability of appointments and suggested that the service could be improved by offering appointments within a shorter timeframe or releasing them at different times of day. People also said that they would use the service more if different types of appointment were available.

Two key barriers to people using GP online services were identified. Firstly, many people said that they were unaware of GP online services, however expressed interest in signing-up; this indicates that more could be done to raise awareness. Secondly, there was some frustration expressed at the sign-up process and the difficulty in resetting passwords. Some people also said that they were concerned about the safety of accessing GP services online, particularly the security of their personal information.

It is also important to acknowledge that, while online services may be beneficial for some, individuals are entitled to exercise their personal preference and there are many people who still prefer to speak to someone in person or over the telephone. However, increased use of GP online services by others can release reception time within practices therefore also being of benefit to those who choose not to manage their time online.

Suggested Actions

Practices should:

1. Consider using more proactive approaches, such as drawing on PPG support, to advertise and give supplementary information on (e.g. online security, benefits for monitoring health) the full range of GP online services available;
2. Consider increasing the range (both the timeframe and type) of appointments made available to patients online.

Practices could:

3. Consider how the availability of GP online services is communicated to patients who are more likely to require regular contact with services (e.g. those with long-term conditions), to highlight the potential benefits of using this service;

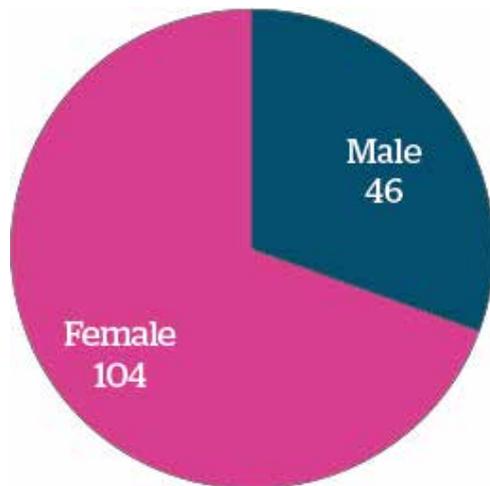
4. Consult with IT system providers to consider whether sufficient help is available with sign-up and password reset processes, and seek feedback from patients to monitor this issue;

5. Consult with IT system providers to consider the use of digital messaging systems for notifications of prescription and test result availability.



Method and Participation

Gender



People spoken to in total - 296

Surveys collected - 162

New sign-ups - 30

Intended sign-ups - 34

Reactivations - 6

Healthwatch Surrey members online - 13

Recruitment and Participation

Two methods of recruitment were used to invite Surrey residents to give their feedback:

- 1) We circulated an online survey via our social media channels;
- 2) We visited eight GP practices to speak to people visiting their GP in Surrey.

Between 30th September and 6th October 2017 we visited eight GP practices in Surrey to raise awareness of GP online services and to find out more about people's thoughts on using these services; people told us about their experiences of using online appointment booking, repeat prescription orders and accessing health records online, and discussed any concerns and/or barriers to signing up and using online services.

We also circulated a short survey via our social media to extend the opportunity give feedback to a larger population. In addition, we sent a call to action to the Healthwatch Surrey team, including board members and volunteers, to sign-up to GP online services with opportunity to feedback their experience too.

Online Survey

The survey was designed to give a mix of quantitative and qualitative data about using GP online services. The survey was promoted via our social media channels (Facebook, Twitter) and on our website and was accompanied by a short video. Paper copies were disseminated during visits to GP practices for people who wished to give written rather than verbal feedback.

Practice Visits

Visits to GP practices lasted two hours and were led by a combination of either two Healthwatch Surrey volunteers, a Healthwatch Surrey volunteer paired with a Healthwatch Surrey member of staff, or two Healthwatch Surrey staff members. In some cases, a PPG member was also available to support the visit. The purpose of the visits was to give people opportunity to feedback about GP online services, and if they had not used online services, to share any concerns or barriers they had experienced. We also used this time to raise awareness of the online services and provide step-by-step information on how to sign-up.



Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all the local residents who took the time to give us their feedback on GP online services, the volunteers who gave up their time to visit local surgeries, and to practice staff and Patient Participation Group members who supported our visits during Get Online Week 2017.

Healthwatch Surrey Volunteers: Jackie Parry, Liz Sawyer, Jill Bowman, Hannah Webb, Jane Owens, Gareth Jones, John Tibbles.

Participating Practices: Cranleigh Medical Practice, Downing Street Practice, Haslemere Health Centre, Heatherside Surgery, Moat House Surgery, Fountain Practice, Park Road Surgery, Sunbury Health Centre.

Patient Participation Group: Lynda MacDermott, Duncan Barratt, Jill Wood, Margaret Edwards, Thelma Spiers, Diane Littlewood, Tina Mason, Janet Fearnley, Sam Bartlett, Alan Rogers.

Thank you to Surrey County Council and the Good

Things Foundation for inviting us to participate in Get Online Week events.

What Next

Healthwatch Surrey will share this report with Practice Managers, Patient Participation Groups, and Commissioners as well as local people and the people who took part. We hope that by raising awareness of the availability of these services, and sharing feedback on what is working well and what could be improved, more people will be appropriately supported to sign up for and use GP online services in the future should they wish to make use of this facility.

Further Resources

For more information about GP online services visit: www.nhs.uk/GPonlineservices

For information about support to build your confidence online visit: <https://www.onlinecentresnetwork.org/>

For more information about the Good Things Foundation visit: <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/>

About Healthwatch Surrey

Healthwatch Surrey is an independent local watchdog that gives the people of Surrey a voice to improve, shape and get the best from health and social care services.

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