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practice website upgrades to make a difference this winter and beyond

livi

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Introduction

Many GP practices are under immense strain at present. But as teams grapple with the busy winter period, outdated practice website design may be pouring further unnecessary pressure on teams.

Thankfully, some small upgrades could make a big difference. Indeed, a new paper from policy research centre, Future Health, points to some simple enhancements that could free up practice lines, clinical resources and help more patients find services they need.

Entitled 'Tackling pressures and improving patient experience: The case for upgrading GP websites,' Future Health assessed the standards of a sample of 120 GP websites. They measured the quality of information provided to patients with "a particular focus on those elements which could reduce GP workload and empower patients in improved self-care."

Future Health found that while there were common website templates used across different GP practices, information and tools available for patients were still highly variable, with a third of practice websites found to be inadequate in their functionality and ease of navigation.

Here, we explore the key findings and outline 5 action areas to upgrade and improve GP websites.

Putting the right booking tools in place

Running counter to the notion that all of primary care has 'gone digital' in the wake of COVID-19, more than a quarter of GP websites did not allow patients to book a consultation online, according to Future Health. Furthermore, 34% of websites did not offer the ability to book telephone or video consultations or had not included this information on their website.

Richard Sloggett, publication author and former Special Adviser at the Department of Health and Social Care notes, "We need as many routes open as possible for patients to access the information and care they need." Certainly so. These digital gaps could potentially fuel the daily scramble for appointment slots, leading to calls for a task that could be completed quickly and easily via an optimised practice website.

At a base level, offering a range of appointment options online is essential. After all, as identified by NHS England's guide on creating highly usable and accessible GP websites, the simple act of booking an appointment online is one of the 'key tasks' patients visit practice websites for. It is the go-to page for patients.

Including information on how patients can book, cancel or change appointments is the foundation of a highly usable appointment page. And practices should look to include just the right level of detail on these processes. Further guidance from NHS England on appointment pages is available here.

34%

of websites did not offer the ability to book telephone or video consultations

Top tip

1

Think of the contact routes your practice website currently has in place. You may already offer the ability to book appointments and online and telephone consultations. However, some small tweaks could really help to drive engagement and conversion for these tasks. This might include utilising keywords or search terms that are top of mind for patients when visiting your appointments page.

Livi practice websites make this easy for practices and patients, and are structured around top patient tasks and keywords patients scan for. We aim to build services our partner practices offer into journeys that patients will understand and connect to in a clear way. This enables patients to find the task they need online quickly and easily.

Signposting for success

68% of websites analysed by Future Health did not provide compre-hensive signposting to other local NHS services such as pharmacies and NHS 111. In addition, sites did not offer functionality to patients to enter their postcode in order to search for such services.

Future Health notes, "While there is no quick fix for staffing shortages in primary care, there is a more immediate opportunity to optimise GP websites to support patients in finding the information they need and signpost them to relevant services without burdening GP phonelines and clogging up GP appointments unnecessarily."

Indeed, information on local services may help patients to locate more appropriate options for their needs and where possible, self-refer. This could potentially reduce wasted practice resource and also help ensure patients are in the right place to receive the right care.

As a part of signposting, NHS England recommends making calls to action (CTAs) as clear as possible: "Calls to action are buttons or links that start users on a journey or link them to somewhere else where they can start a task. The words used on these calls to action and the visual design of them are both important."

68%

of websites analysed did not provide comprehensive signposting to other local NHS services

Top tip

2

The NHS Digital Service Manual has further information on using buttons and action links for signposting as well as how to write good links. Look at your website and check if you have a dedicated, up-to-date page with information on local services in your area. It should be easy to find and offer a search function to patients by postcode if possible. Optimal builds will include visual links and CTAs that clearly signpost to other services.

Here at Livi, we have designed our websites platform to NHS Digital Service Manual standards and deliver tried and tested sign-posting features. Our pages include local service information for mental health, physiotherapy, sexual health and smoking cessation services. Furthermore, our approach goes beyond offering a simple local service directory. Instead, we aim to guide patients who have a specific issue to relevant content explaining where they can seek help and assistance, and how they can self-refer where appropriate.

Making navigation easy

31% of websites were difficult to navigate and use for patients in Future Health's assessment.

A clear site structure, easy to use main menu and search functionality will help patients find what they need quickly. That starts with a highly usable homepage. In a comparison of best practice examples, Future Health research highlights clean home page navigation with clearly labelled titles for tasks and minimal information as key elements of optimal builds.

NHS England similarly advocates the importance of homepages, noting that they are the first place 80% of patients look to complete a task. In their guide, NHS England recommends having up to six menu sections including home, appointments, prescriptions, services, health information, support and about us. Under which, each additional piece of information, task or link should sit "like the categories of books in a library."

31%
of websites were difficult to navigate and use for patients

80%
of patients look to homepages to complete a task

Top tip

When it comes to homepages and navigation, simplicity is key. Practices should avoid redundant information or lengthy, complex wording. Short, clear CTAs can be the difference between another call or another patient task successfully completed online.

Livi's website platform follows NHS best practice, reflecting the navigation, structure, functionality, and look and feel of NHS websites. Our expert team of inhouse content designers and writers take care of content creation too, building pages with minimal content as recommended by guidelines. And accessibility and usability comes built into our platform.

The aim is to reduce visual clutter, so patients can find what they're looking for more easily. So, we offer a simple site search and navigation menu to ensure an optimal journey for patients from your homepage across your site. In addition, as part of our commitment to continuous quality improvement, we utilise site analytics data to evaluate the top pages patients look for and adapt site builds accordingly.

Taking care of tasks

Outside of booking appointments, other key tasks patients visit practice websites to complete include obtaining prescriptions online or fit notes. And yet, according to Future Health, only 28% of practices provide the ability to request a fit note online and just over a fifth of practices enable patients to reorder prescriptions.

In regards to the latter, NHS England identifies it as the "second most important task" after appointments. Furthermore, as a task that is repeated regularly, not having the right online avenue for it could potentially clog up phone lines unnecessarily and prevent other patients from accessing the care they need.

For highly usable prescription pages, NHS England recommends providing information on options available to obtain repeat prescriptions as well as clear links to tools or forms to arrange one. Practices should also include information about medication queries, local pharmacies, contact details and opening times to patients.

With regards to fit notes, NHS England suggests providing a link to the national guidance and fit note site, to enable patients to self-certify when applicable. For patients who need them, providing a link/email so they can request a statement of fitness for work is also recommended.

28%
of practices provide the ability to request a fit note online

Top tip

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To combat digital exclusion, connect patients to a range of options and channels to obtain repeat prescriptions and fit notes.

That's exactly what we do here at Livi, based on a given practice's individual preferences and workflow. This may include self-service options such as the NHS app, SystmOnline and Patient Access. Additionally, our request form requires no login and provides a good option for patients who do not elect to use self-service options. We can also offer telephone and in-person options if required.

For fit notes, our request form has delivered a 98% completion rate for our partners. Rather than just asking patients to read through eligibility criteria, we ask simple questions that guide the patient as to whether they're eligible. This approach is backed by health literacy research.

Getting winter ready

Finally, ensuring your website has the necessary information in place online this winter is all important. The usual challenges of the season such as flu and COVID will be a consistent presence once again.

Future Health research identified that 40% of practices had no information on vaccinations, including Covid and flu vaccinations. While only 13% of practices signposted to NHS pages on vaccination schedules or provided a comprehensive search function.

Vaccinations and health screenings are suggested for inclusion under the appointment category by NHS England. While practices may also include information on how to book either via the NHS app or alternative online tools. NHS England also suggests linking to the NHS vaccination and immunisation page which provides trusted, accessible information.

40%
of practices had no information on vaccinations

13%
of practices signposted to NHS pages on vaccination schedules

Top tip

5

With seasonal issues, providing timely, correct information is vital.

Our platform provides an agile, flexible solution that operates in two modes. First, when a practice is not currently offering vaccinations, our pages provide information on when they will become available. Then, during season, customised content is rolled out to inform patients when and where they can receive their vaccine.

For PCNs and ICBSs, we also offer the ability to roll-out updates on vaccinations and across multiple sites in just a few clicks during the busy winter months.
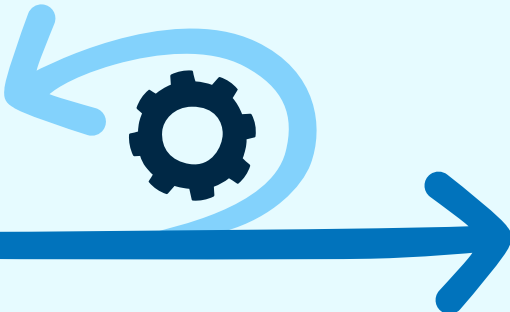
Conclusion

Future Health's research, as with previous successive GP surveys, shows that there is an opportunity to dramatically improve GP websites.

Indeed, if findings from the sample were replicated nationally it is estimated:

10.5 million

patients in England do not have access to an adequate GP website[1]

2200

GP websites either do not enable patients to book telephone or video appointments, or offer this service[2]

680,000

people have access to a GP website with the lowest rating (0), where a website does not meet any of the core criteria[3]

While many practices have made great strides in making changes in recent times, there is still variation in the online experience patients receive and practices experience as a result of it. Following a uniform best-practice standard set out by NHS England and the NHS Digital Service Manual could help to deliver optimal GP websites across the board and greatly benefit patients, practices and the wider system.

Small upgrades in the 5 key areas – appointments, signposting, navigation, tasks and information, could potentially make a huge difference this winter and beyond. In the words of publication author, Richard Sloggett:

"GP websites are receiving increasing traffic but as this research shows, many need upgrading to support better patient care and to alleviate system pressures. The Government and NHS England should urgently upgrade primary care websites as part of their winter planning. A relatively small but urgent investment could make a big difference."

Future Health recommends integrated care systems should be assigned funding to work with their primary care networks on upgrading websites in their region this winter with a pot of £5-10m assigned to the task. This money could be resourced either from winter pressures funding or diverted underspend from within the Unified Technology Fund.

Here at Livi, we fully agree with this recommendation and stand ready to support practices and systems to deliver the upgrades required.

[1] https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/patients-registe-red-at-a-gp-practice/october-2022; Calculation based on overall national patient list size 61,964,910, 55% of patients accessing practice information online, 31% of websites being accessed being inadequate (rating of 0-2 on usability)

[2] https://www.gponline.com/fifth-gp-practices-closed-merged-nhs-england-for-med/article/1790429#:~:text=There%20are%20now%206%2C495%20GP,from%20 8%2C106%20in%20April%202013; Calculation based on 34% of 6495 GP practices

[3] Calculation based on overall national patient list size 61,964,910, 55% of patients accessing practice information online, 2% of websites receiving this rating

Further information

Livi can deliver practice websites built to NHS guidelines for individual practices, PCNs and ICBs and mobilise new sites in just seven days. A small investment could make a big difference this winter and beyond.

Learn more: livi.co.uk/practice-websites

Try the demo: practice-manager.livi.co.uk/demo/

Talk to us

For new website enquiries, email: dillon.sykes@livi.co.uk

Or book a call here

Further resources

A full copy of Future Health's research report, 'Tackling pressures and improving patient experience: The case for upgrading GP websites' is available here

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