
Hywel Dda Community Health Council

Accessing Your GP – Carmarthenshire

Seeing a GP in Hywel Dda, what you told us....

March 2022



Accessible formats

This report is also available in Welsh.

If you would like this publication in an alternative format and/or language, please contact us.

You can download it from our website or ask for a copy by contacting our office.

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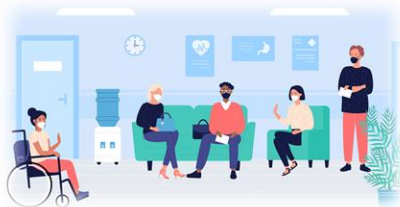
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About the Community Health Councils (CHCs)

CHCs are independent bodies that reflect the views and represent the interests of people living in Wales on their National Health Service (NHS). CHCs encourage and support people to have a voice in the design, planning and delivery of NHS services.

CHCs are often thought of as the independent watchdog of the NHS within Wales. There are 7 CHCs in Wales. Each one represents the “patient and public” voice in a different part of Wales.

Each CHC:



Carries out regular visits to health services to hear from people using the service (and the people providing care) to influence the changes that can make a big difference



Reaches out to people within local communities to provide information, and gather views and experiences of NHS services. CHCs use this information to check how services are performing and to ensure the NHS takes action to make things better where needed



Gets involved with health service managers when they are thinking about making changes to the way services are delivered so that people and communities have their say from the start



Provides a complaints advocacy service that is free, independent and confidential to help people to raise their concerns about NHS care and treatment.

CHCs hear from the public in many different ways. Before the coronavirus pandemic, CHCs regularly visited different NHS services such as GPs and hospitals to hear from people when they were receiving care and treatment. CHCs also heard from people at local community events and through community representatives such as councilors and politicians.

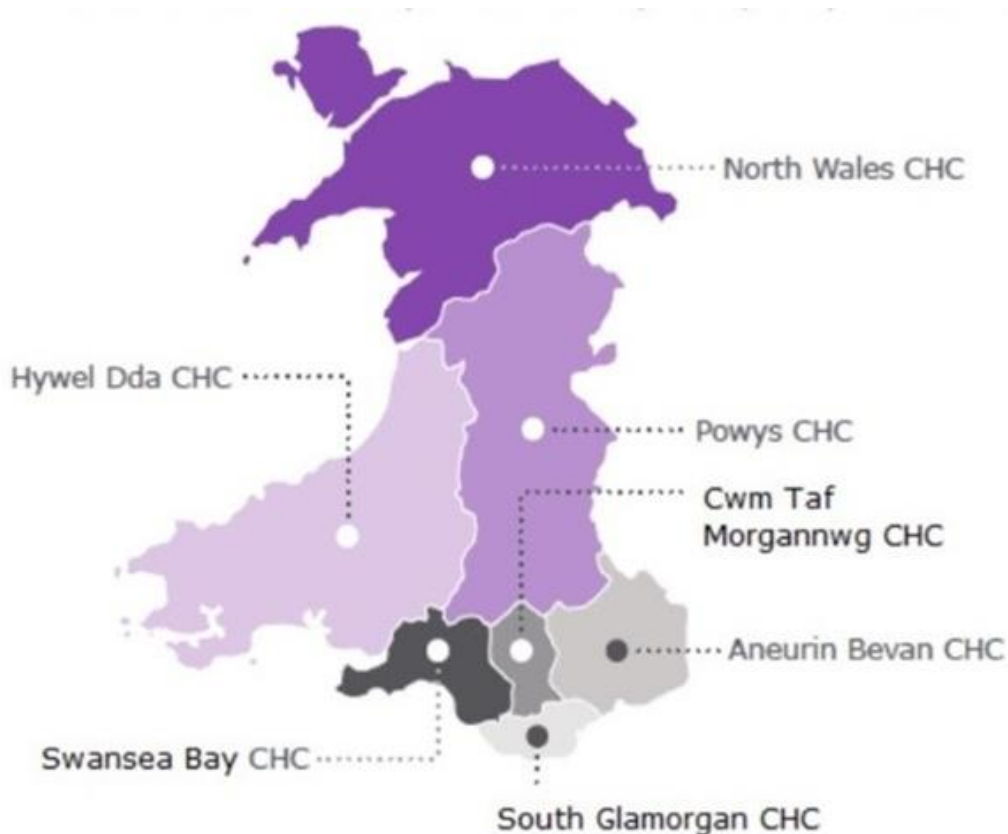
CHCs had frequent contact with various groups and organisations within the community such as Citizens Advice, schools, voluntary organisations for different charities etc. CHCs also heard from people attending our meetings and making contact with our offices and staff.

Since the coronavirus pandemic, these ways of listening to people have had to change, so CHCs have focused on hearing directly from people in different ways.

Whilst we have not been able to meet people on a face-to-face basis because of the restrictions in place, many people have learned new ways of doing things differently, often using technology. This includes on-line surveys, using apps on their mobile phones, video-conferencing and social media. We have used these to hear from people about their views and experiences of NHS care.

We know that not everyone has been able to use technology or these new ways of communicating. There may be people finding it harder to be heard under these very unusual pandemic times. To try to overcome this we have still been using more traditional methods such as paper surveys.

Hywel Dda CHC represents the interests of people living within the three counties of Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire.

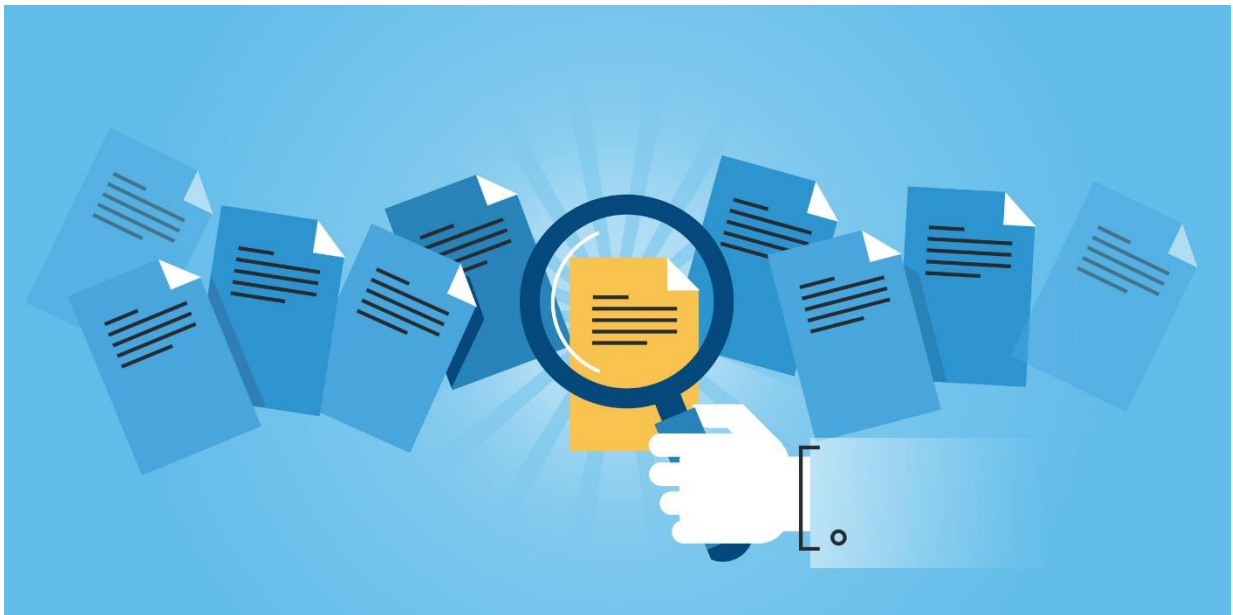


Background

Following the number of concerns received by Hywel Dda Community Health Council (HDCHC) over the past year on access to Primary Care Services, our Executive Committee agreed to undertake a project to seek the views of the public on their experiences of accessing their GP practice.

The project ran between September 2021 and March 2022.

This report sets out our findings for GP practices within Carmarthenshire.



Introduction

GP services play a vital role within the wider system of health and care in Wales. GPs are usually the first point of care for more than 90% of people using NHS services in Wales. GPs are independent contractors to the NHS (that is, GPs are self-employed and not employees of the NHS).

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the way we access our GP practices. Instead of phoning for an appointment or walking into a surgery, access to GP services has rapidly moved to online bookings, video and phone consultations. Our report makes it clear that many people are struggling to access care from their GP practice, often leaving them feeling frustrated.

We wanted to find out from people what is working well and what needs to be improved. Patients told us the impact that these changes had on them and what it meant for them during the last year. How easy was it to access GP services? We also wanted to know how remote (telephone and video) appointments worked for people.

There are 17 practices in Carmarthenshire providing general primary and preventative care to around 190,073 people within an area of 927.7sq miles.

We had a great response from people within the 3 Counties, with over 250 completed responses from patients living in Carmarthenshire.



- the response to our survey was fantastic. We also looked at information coming to the CHC by other means: through general enquiries received by the office; by phone; email and by post
- through concerns being shared with our complaint's advocacy service
- social media discussions on Facebook and Twitter
- comments gathered from an all-Wales CHC survey asking people to tell us about their health care.



What we did

Traditionally, we visited GP surgeries to talk with and listen to patients regarding access and the care they received.

When we visited, we found that patients were happy to tell us about their experiences.

This year due to COVID we had to work differently, 20 surveys, together with prepaid envelopes, were posted out to each GP practice in Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, and Pembrokeshire. The survey was also available on our website, on our social media and in our newsletters.

We didn't ask many detailed questions in our survey, instead we simply asked the public:

- How easy was it to access your GP surgery?
- How easy was it to make an appointment?
- Tell us what went well
- If your experience was not so good, please tell us what the problems were
- Thinking about your appointment – what do you think could be changed to make things better?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your health care during the pandemic?



What we heard from the Amman Gwendraeth Cluster

There are eight practices that operate in the Amman Gwendraeth Cluster. GP clusters are typically groups of between five to eight GP practices in a close geographical location.

Here are the GP clusters for Amman Gwendraeth:

Amman Valley Medical Practice
Brynteg Surgery
Coalbrook Surgery
Meddygfa Minafon
Meddygfa Penygroes
Meddygfa Sarn
Meddygfa'r Tymbl
Margaret Street Surgery

The Amman Gwendraeth Cluster is a set of communities in urban, semi-rural and rural settings. The Cluster Network serves a population of 59,967 in Hywel Dda University Health Board. There are two Health Board Managed Practices within the Cluster.

These are some of the stories the public told us about accessing their GP and getting an appointment during the pandemic. We heard that it has been a struggle for many to get through to their GP practice by phone, especially first thing in the morning. Some found it easier to access the GP phonelines later in the day but once connected were then told to phone back in the morning as all appointments had been booked. Those who used the on-line platform "Ask my GP" found it a little easier to make an appointment or access the GP and received a telephone call

the following day. Some people, despite using the online service were not confident in using this platform to access their GP practices.

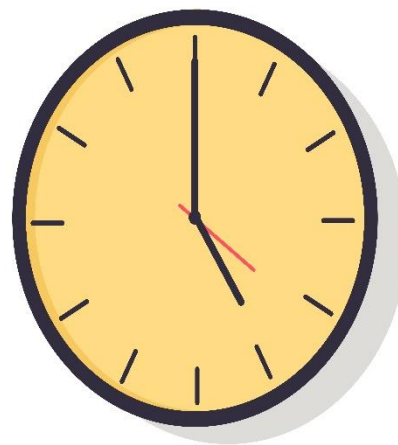
I had to make an appointment by using the computer, first thing in the morning. I found it stressful. I don't like the computer and I'm not confident waiting on the phone

Easy to contact. Never managed to get a face-to-face appointment

Very difficult. They have an answer machine that states "there is more than 20 people in the queue and you cannot wait". At times I've spent the entire day trying (unsuccessfully) to get through. Getting an appointment was very difficult and upsetting.

Unable to get an appointment. Went to the surgery, told to go home and phone for a telephone appointment. Rang and told appointments had gone by the same person who told me to go home and phone.

If you are not on the phone at 8.30 in the morning you have no hope phoned at 8.45 told to try again tomorrow all appointments full for today - no alternative or advice.





Almost impossible. I work full time & am unable to carry my phone at work making a call back impossible. If I could have an actual time slot. I could take a call. They refuse any face-to-face appointments & have removed the e-consult feature meaning there is no way of getting an appointment without ringing at 8am & sitting in a queue for up to an hour to then be offered a call back. It's not good enough.

Many people struggled to get through on the phone and when they finally got through, they were told that all the appointments had been booked; this left them facing the same process the following day often with the same outcome. Many were left feeling frustrated and angry.

Some people struggled with the on-line e consult platform stating that some GPs had taken off the feature. One person told us:

“I was unable to speak to a doctor. I filled in an online form - I was then emailed and advised a prescription for antibiotics were in the pharmacy. No actual contact from anyone to discuss symptoms which I found a bit worrying.”

Phoning on behalf of deaf and blind family member. Would not give appointment. Had to wait for doctor to ring back. Social services got involved and arranged doctor's appointment in the end. Very stressful

Access to my surgery has been great. I have contacted them by phone and by e-consult, I have been given a face-to-face appointment the same day when it was needed or the doctor has dealt with it over the phone. The reception and doctors have been brilliant

I was happy with my experience



A small majority of people told us when they got through to the GP practice that some receptionists were rude, unhelpful and did not show empathy

Reception staff are always rude and not helpful. They have no empathy sadly. I understand they have a very busy & stressful job but I think they act like they are receptionists for a non-health based sector when in fact they are working with patients that are going to need kindness and care, not just told phone back tomorrow over and over again.

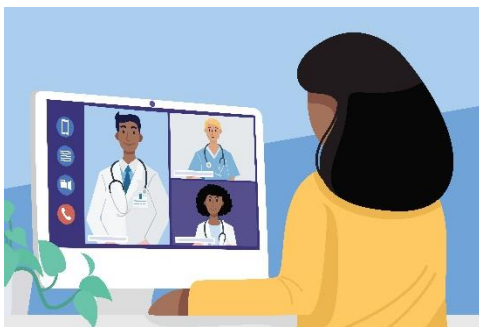
Rudeness text messages are not acceptable. I received a text message from the receptionist advising me to contact mental health nurse that was unacceptable.

Rude and arrogant receptionist who thinks she has the same qualifications as a GP and can diagnose me over the phone.

Some people described the 'smooth process' they had when they tried to get through to their surgery; no phone problems and they were offered a face-to-face appointment or a telephone consultation.

Credit where credit is due. Spoke to the actual doctor yesterday. Very pleasant and helpful. Receptionist polite and helpful

Nothing it worked perfectly, and I have only had to go to the surgery when I needed to be examined.



None, telephone triage really works for me. It is better than having to go to surgery to see doctor

What we heard from the Llanelli Cluster

Ty Elli

Meddygfa Tywyn Bach

Llwynhendy Health Centre

Llangennech Surgery

Fairfield Surgery

Avenue Villa Surgery

Ash Grove Medical Centre

There are seven practices which operate in the Llanelli Cluster area. Llanelli clusters serve communities in urban, semi-rural and rural settings. The Llanelli Cluster Network serves a population of 61,755 which is the second largest in Hywel Dda University Health Board. These are some of the stories the public told us about accessing their GP and getting an appointment during the pandemic within the Llanelli area.



Very simple, short queue on phone line, telephone consultation arranged with doctor to decide if face to face was needed. Face to face then arranged for the same day.

Tried for over a week to get through to reception in the mornings, as directed. When I eventually got through after 15 mins wait, all appointments for that day were gone. I eventually had a call-back from a doctor late in the afternoon. It was not very satisfactory as she could not see me so could not assess how I was. Medication was prescribed for 1 month.

Long delays on phone, every time. Sometimes too long to wait. Once I got through, all appointments were gone. Gave up trying to see a doctor, made appointment with nurse instead. Good move, she was better!

I was not able to have an appointment under any circumstances, I have phoned late morning to be told doctor hasn't arrived at surgery?

Several people expressed that when they phoned at 8:30 in the morning that they were in a queuing system it took some people over 45 minutes to be answered. When they eventually got through, they were told that all appointments were gone and they would have to try again in the morning. One person informed us that there were no appointments available, only 1 GP available. Expecting patients to use an App which is not helpful for elderly people.



Very difficult,
failed to get appt
first day after 2
hours on hold.
Rung next day for
appt and had to
go through
process all over
again

Started phoning at
8.30 got through
9.55 to be told no
appointments left
and I was too late for
Dr to ring back

Impossible to get
through 47 mins
on the phone to
be told I had to
use an app,
nothing goes well

When people eventually got through, they felt frustrated that all the appointments had gone. They were also unsatisfied with the systems in place.

Poor systems in place,
staff poorly trained
and no one to directly
complain to.

Allow patients to go into
surgery to make appts. If
Dr wants you back in set
time, let them make the
appts. It is not unusual to
have to wait for 3 weeks
for 'more appts to be
released' - but Dr may
want you back in 1 or 2
weeks to check
medications etc.

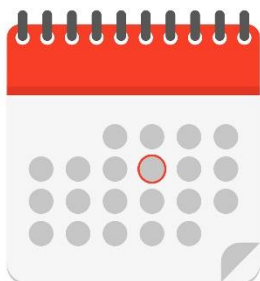
Surgery have not
got e-consult they
did at one time.
Please reintroduce
it.

To be treated with a
modicum of decency and
not to have to wait 20
minutes for the phone to
be answered to be told that
all the appointments had
gone and ring again
tomorrow where the
process is repeated daily.

Several patients stated that they would like video consultation or e consults where they could book their appointments and order their medication.

Re-introduce the e-consult facility would help

Booking in advance (saving some spaces for more urgent same day appts)
2. Online booking



After filling in e-consult form, the only issue is if I am working the next day sometimes, I missed the call on the few occasions I did an e-consult. I think an email to explain the next approach is more accessible that a phone call for myself personally as I was not able to answer the phone.

Some people had a good experience when they got through to the practice. One person told us "I've attended my surgery several times through the pandemic, also had a baby 2 weeks into the first lockdown. I haven't had any problems making face to face appointments for myself or baby. All staff have been very helpful, I've felt safe while attending the surgery as covid restrictions were properly in place and followed".

Nothing,
service, and
staff were
amazing

Quick and easy to get
through to surgery.
Receptionists always polite,
and very helpful. Very
satisfied with appointment
and outcome of visit with
GP. The health centre is run
very efficiently, therefore I
do not feel it requires any
changes



I am quite happy
with the present
arrangements

What we heard from the Tywi Taf (2ts) Cluster

There are eight GP Practices with eight main and two branch surgeries stretching from Whitland in west Carmarthenshire to Llandovery in the north east.

Coach & Horses Surgery

Furnace House Surgery

Llanfair Surgery

Meddygfa Taf

Meddygfa Teilo

Meddygfa Tywi

Morfa Lane Surgery

St Peter's Surgery

The Tywi/Taf (2Ts) Cluster has a registered population of 58,649. The geographical area covered by the Cluster is 19,385km², equating to 81% of the total land mass of Carmarthenshire. These are some of the stories the public told us about accessing their GP and getting an appointment during the pandemic within the 2ts area.

Easy to contact surgery but could not have appointment, only telephone triage



Contact was quick and easy. Telephone answered promptly, and pleasantly. Dr Appt most satisfactory. Appt by telephone

Very easy to contact them. E consult and phone calls responded to straight away. Appointment was initially a phone call followed by a face-to-face appointment in the surgery. We were allowed to wait inside the surgery in the waiting room, but we were the only ones. Felt safe and staff were welcoming.

Easy to contact. Difficult to get an appointment.



Some people's experience of getting through to the GP by phone was easy, others found it more difficult.


Always a long wait on hold for someone to pick up, only ever offered a phone appointment.

Not easy. Getting through took a while. The phone rang and just stopped. No queue notification. Had to keep re-dialling


Telephone surgery to be told no forward appts are being made. To ring back next morning at 8.30am tried ringing at this time the automatic answer phone message on saying surgery is now closed open between 8.30am and 6pm although it was actually 8.35am by this time

One person told us “Contacted by phone in afternoon. All appointments by e consult. Filled in e consult and got response very quickly.”

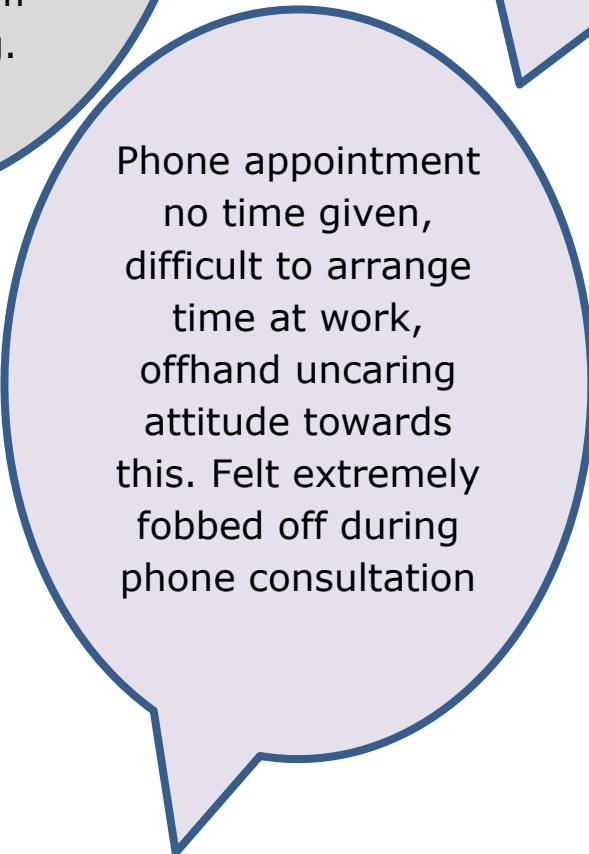
Some people had a good experience once they got through on the phones others did not have such a good experience. For those who did not have a good experience it was mostly to do with not given a time when the GP would ring back.



Appointment was initially a phone call followed by a face-to-face appointment in the surgery. We were allowed to wait inside the surgery in the waiting room, but we were the only ones. Felt safe and staff were welcoming.



I like having telephone triage appointments as they fit in with work, but I am confident I can see my GP if required.



Phone appointment no time given, difficult to arrange time at work, offhand uncaring attitude towards this. Felt extremely fobbed off during phone consultation

No return call received, maybe a more specific time should be given?

Receptionist decided whether I was worthy of speaking with a GP.



Rang on a Monday & doctor rang back about 15-20 minutes after the time they had said and managed to get an appointment same day to see doctor and appointment was good

Once I got through, I was told that a doctor would ring me back to discuss my problem (a new mole) and book a face-to-face appointment if necessary. The doctor rang me back within an hour and asked if I could take photographs of the mole and email them to him. I did this and then he rang me back and asked me to come in the next day to get it checked. I did this without any problems and overall found the whole procedure very efficient

Learning from what we heard

This report looked at how Covid-19 had changed the way people access their GP and how this affected their experience.

The covid-19 pandemic has worsened access problems in general practice and patients have reported finding it difficult to get through on phones especially at 8:30 am. Some people found it difficult to book appointments and having face to face appointments with a GP. Some people found it hard to access e-consult as this was dependant on the practice people were registered to.

Some people told us while telephone appointments were more convenient for some, they didn't meet everyone's needs, with some people left worried that their health problems were not being addressed.

Changes to the way that people accessed general practice services during the pandemic caused some frustration for those who preferred face-to-face appointments.

Those people with hearing/sight impairment could find telephone consultations difficult so GP practice should demonstrate how such challenges would be dealt with.

Going forward GPs should offer patients a choice of the type of appointment they would prefer whether it be video, face-to-face, or telephone appointments. People should be given an estimated time for a call back from the GP.

The Hywel Dda CHC understands that GP practices may have a reduced number of staff during COVID due to staff shielding or being off sick. The Hywel Dda CHC also understands that some GP practices' buildings would not allow them to have a safe environment for several patients to attend the surgery at the same time, due to the 2-metre rule and lack of space. The public told us that they should have been informed of these constraints with this, and said the public should have been informed of why it took so long to answer the phones.



We would like to thank the public who responded to our survey.

We will feed back your comments to the Hywel Dda Health Board and to the GP practices.

Recommendations

1

GP practices to give a choice to the public on access ie: telephone consultation, face to face consultation, or video consultation

2

GP practices to give an estimated time when people can expect a phone call back

3

Receptionist to have training in customer service

4

All practices to use e- consult

5

GP practices to have advance booking appointments

Thanks

We thank everyone who took the time to share their views and experiences with us about their health and care services and their ideas going forward.

We hope the feedback collected from patients influences healthcare services, to recognise and value what they do well, and take action where needed to make things better.

Feedback

We'd love to hear what you think about this publication, and any suggestions about how we could have improved it, so we can use this to make our future work better.



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Hafan Derwen, St Davids Park, Job's Well Road,
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Dyddiad/Date:

30th May 2022

Helen Williams
Deputy Chief Officer
Hywel Dda Community Health Service
Suite 5, 1st Floor
Ty Myrddin
Old Station Road
Carmarthen SA31 1BT
Dear Ms Williams

Thank you for your letter dated 12 May 2022 and for providing me with the County level reports following the CHC survey on access to GP Practices. I have asked that this information is shared through our Primary Care Services Managers and Locality Leads and that this is reflected on through forthcoming Cluster meetings. Similarly, I am keen that this work is taken into the Access forum of which I am aware you are a member so we can discuss the findings with our colleagues as well as the Local Medical Committee. I have requested that this group develops an action plan that can be considered in conjunction with the recently issued guidance from Welsh Government on the Access agreement for 2022/23, as well as a baseline review of current access arrangements including the status of "doors open".

Whilst it was pleasing to see that some patients had had a good experience when accessing services at their GP Practice it was also disappointing to see that some did not. Whilst I appreciate that at the time of the survey many GP Practices were still experiencing significant pressures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic which was impacting on their ability to provide services to patients in a way that I know they would want to, it was difficult to read some of the quotes from patients who had clearly not been able to access services in a way that we would wish.

Hafan Derwen, Parc Dewi Sant, Heol Ffynnon Job,
Caerfyrddin, Sir Gaerfyrddin, SA31 3BB

Hafan Derwen, St Davids Park, Job's Well Road,
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Miss Maria Battle

Prif Weithredwr/Chief Executive
Mr Steve Moore

Bwrdd Iechyd Prifysgol Hywel Dda yw enw gweithredol Bwrdd Iechyd Lleol Prifysgol Hywel Dda
Hywel Dda University Health Board is the operational name of Hywel Dda University Local Health Board Mae Bwrdd Iechyd Prifysgol
Hywel Dda yn amgylchedd di-fwg Hywel Dda University Health Board operates a smoke free environment

As you will be aware the pandemic also brought with it the opportunity to consult with and access services digitally which we know works differently in each Practice and for each patient. We appreciate that there is no “one size fits all” for either Practices or patients and we will continue to work with Practices across Hywel Dda to ensure that there is a range of access and consultation arrangements in place, that meet the needs of patients as well as ensuring that people are able to access the right care in the right place in a timely manner.

I look forward to the publication of your reports and to seeing the work of the Access Forum in developing an action plan that brings together all aspects of Access to GP Practices as well as to our other Primary Care contractors who have a key role in that wider service provision.

Yours
sincerely,

Jill Paterson

Director of Primary Care, Community and Long-Term Care

Cc for information

Rhian Bond, Assistant Director of Primary Care

Community Health Council