
Hywel Dda Community Health Council

Accessing Your GP - Pembrokeshire

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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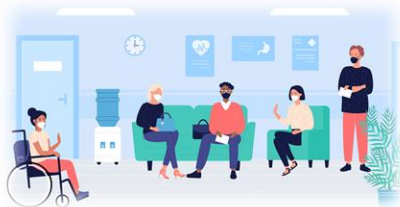
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About the Community Health Councils (CHCs)

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.

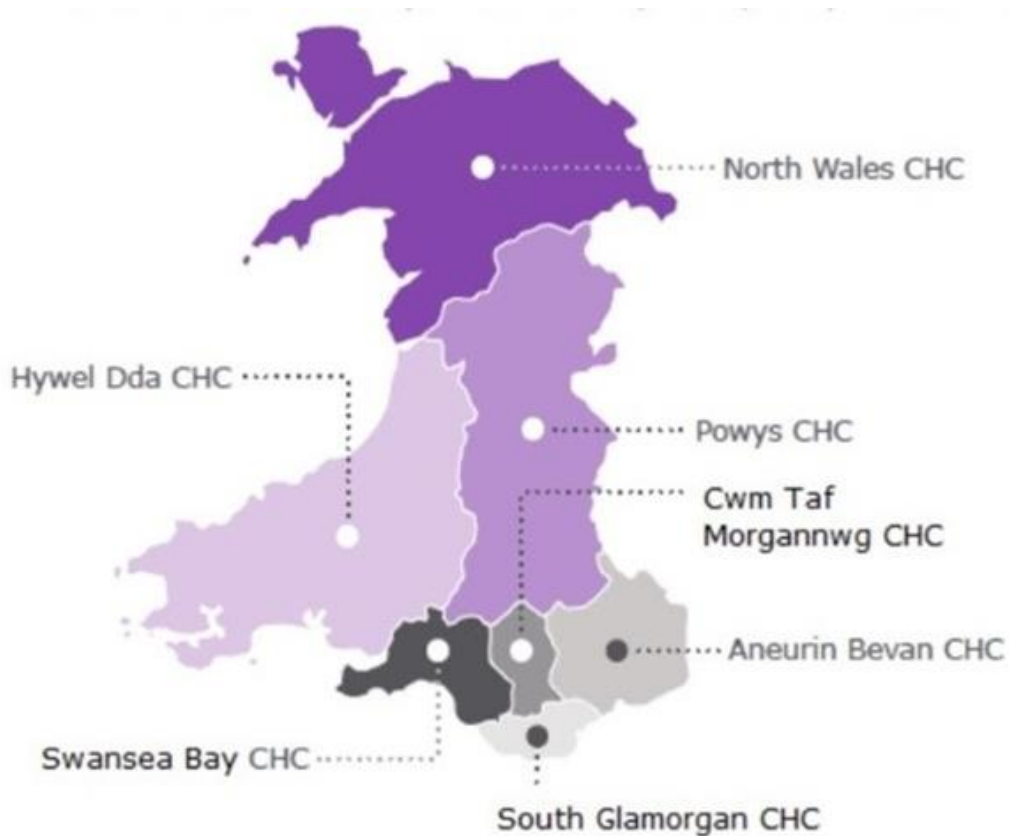
CHCs also had frequent contact with various groups and organisations within the community such as Citizens Advice, schools, voluntary organisations for different charities etc. CHCs also heard from people attending our meetings and making contact with our offices and staff.

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 different 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.

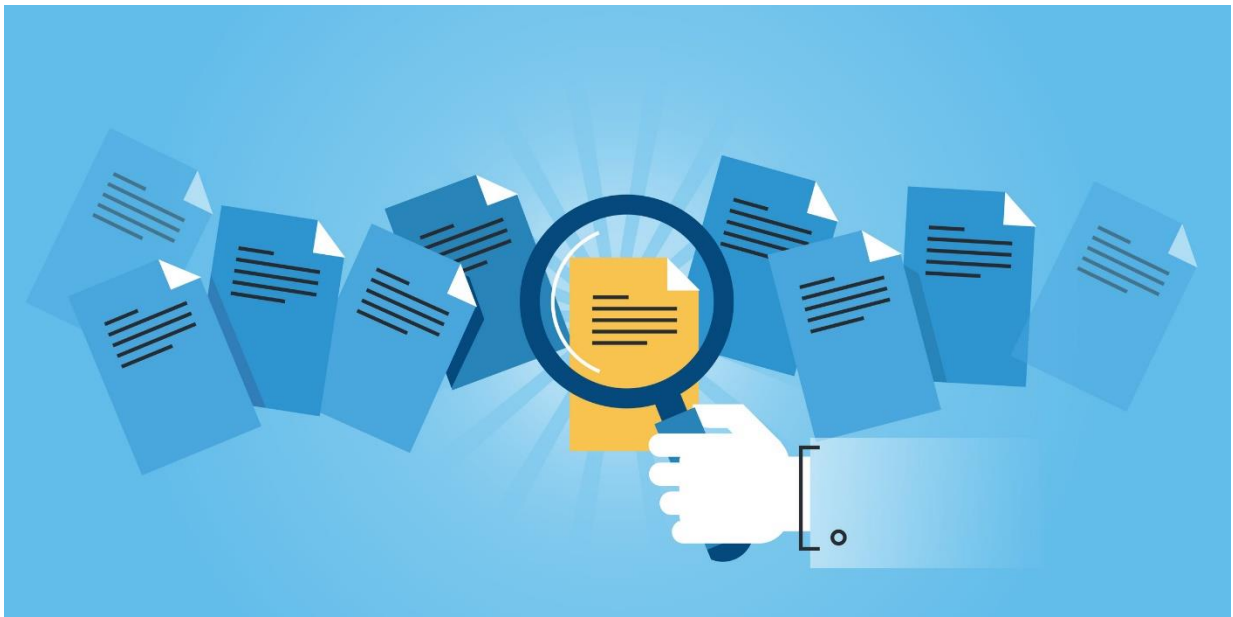


Background

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 Pembrokeshire.



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 have 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 15 GP practices in Pembrokeshire providing general primary and preventative care to around 125,000 people within an area of 613.9 sq. miles.

We had an overwhelming response from people within the 3 Counties, with over 200 completed responses from patients living in Pembrokeshire.



- 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

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.

We heard of people waiting for long periods of time in the GP telephone queuing system or trying numerous times to get through. Looking at the data much depended on which practice

they were registered with as some patients got through to their GP Practice far more easily than others.

I have waited in very long queues. One occasion 1 hour 5 minute telephone queue, to find out if I could get an appointment. It's a good job I don't work. Working people wouldn't have the time to wait

Long wait on the phones half an hour at least, but always managed to get a call back from the GP that same morning or afternoon

Contact can be a bit frustrating at times, but generally no problem

No problem at all. Had all my usual 2-month blood tests. Could contact GP with phone call

Easy to contact by telephone, but expected return call for an appointment never happened

Not a good system, have to phone up on the day at 8am for an appointment (no appointments can be made in advance or if you turn up on the day). Due to the high volume of others doing the same I have regularly been put in a queue of 20+ calls, by the time it is my turn whilst waiting over 40 minutes on the phone there are no appointments left for the day

Not easy during or even before the pandemic. You have had to, for some time, call the surgery at 8am to have any hope of getting an appointment. You cannot book a GP appointment in advance, i.e., only on the day you ring

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.

Others struggled, 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 same outcome. Many were left feeling frustrated and angry.

Almost impossible to get through.
Rang at 8am and was 57th in queue!
It took 12 hrs and 43 mins over a week to get through to be told no appointments available, call back Monday morning!
Took another 3 days to get a phone call back from G.P.

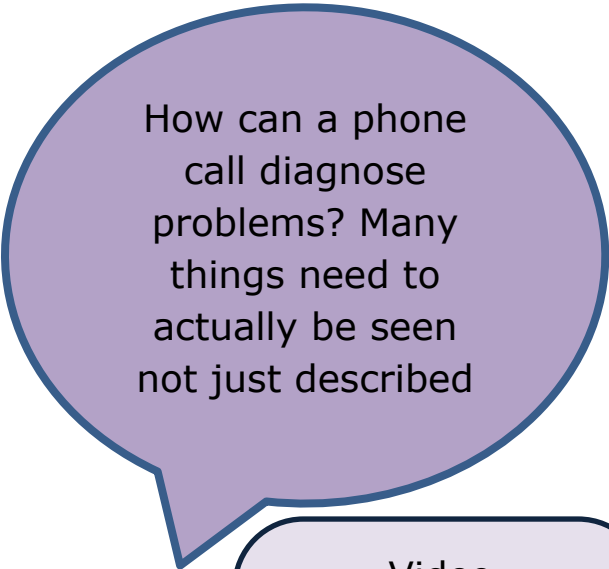
Phoned the surgery, gave my details, then the Dr called me back for a phone consultation. I had to send photos of my son's hands then the Dr prescribed appropriate medication

Telephone consultation can be any time during the day so not always possible to plan for the call-in work schedule. Difficult to show/explain the issue on phone.

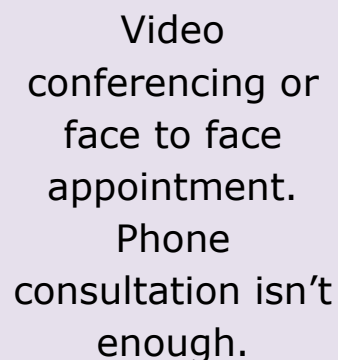
Throughout the pandemic it was important that GP practices provided a safe environment for both the public and staff ensuring that they could safely work to Welsh Government's 2-metre social distance guidelines to limit the risk of infection.

Welsh Government advised GP practices to hold consultations remotely unless there was an urgent need for a face-to-face appointment. As a result, most GP practices stopped face-to-face appointments. Instead, most patients were offered telephone or video consultations. Several GP practices have continued to work in this way, while some have now reintroduced pre-bookable appointments.

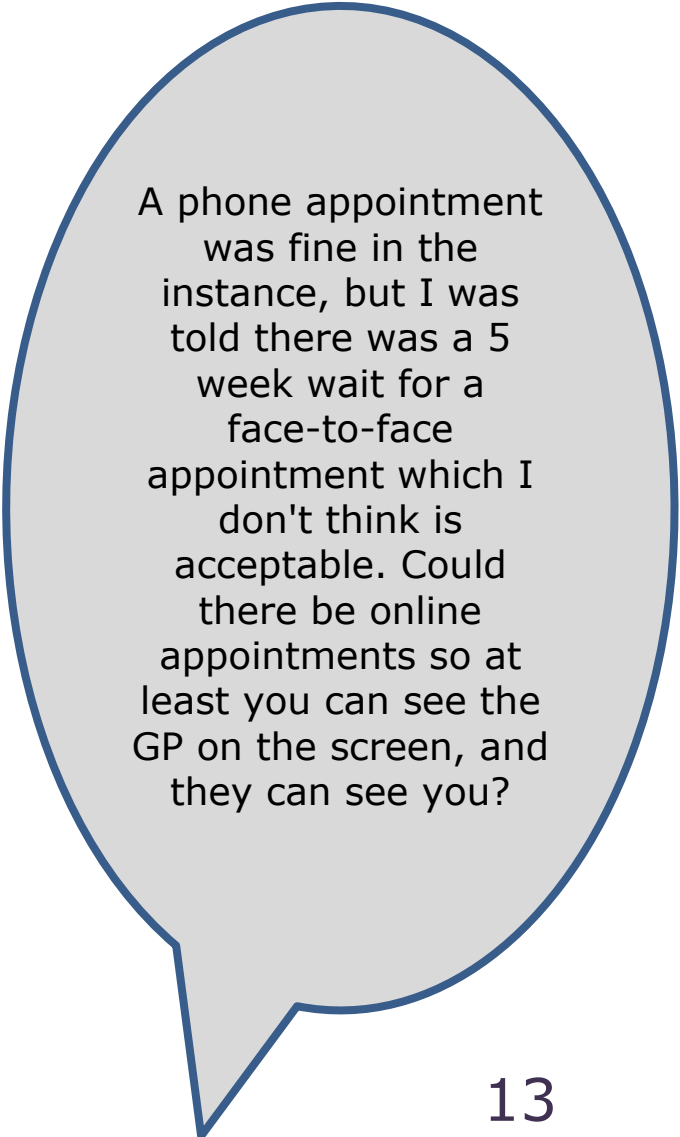
Some people were happy with telephone consultations others found it hard to adapt feeling uneasy at not having face-to-face conversation and having doubts about the diagnosis.



How can a phone call diagnose problems? Many things need to actually be seen not just described



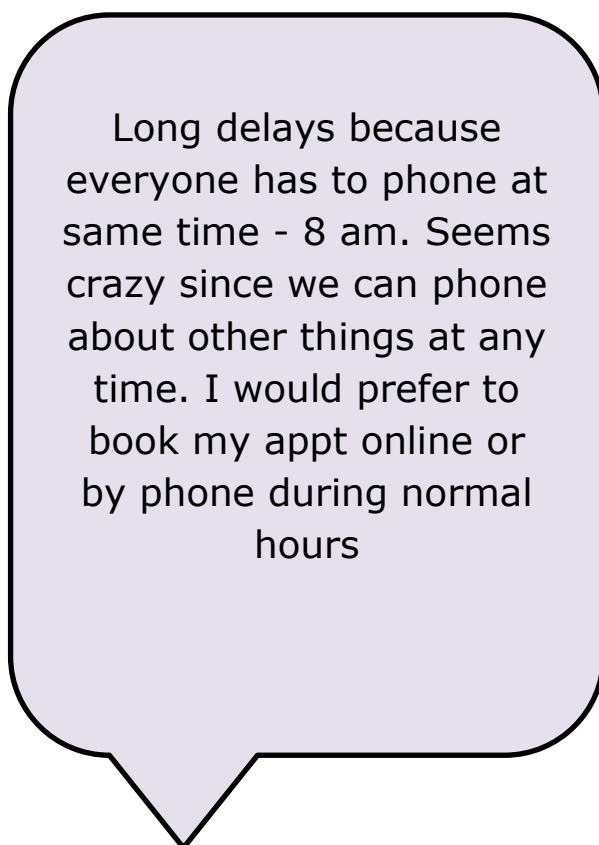
Video conferencing or face to face appointment. Phone consultation isn't enough.



A phone appointment was fine in the instance, but I was told there was a 5 week wait for a face-to-face appointment which I don't think is acceptable. Could there be online appointments so at least you can see the GP on the screen, and they can see you?

People expressed varying views on telephone consultations, ranging from enthusiasm to utter frustration. The new system suited some patients, especially those who work, avoiding the need to rearrange working day to come into the surgery. Some found it problematic, especially when an approximate time for the consultation was not given. A small number stated that they had not received the awaited phone call from the GP.

A proportion of negative comments were about the process rather than the telephone consultation itself, for example, difficulty getting through on the phone or being unable to arrange their day as they were waiting for the GP to return their call. Some felt that a video consultation would have suited them better.



Long delays because everyone has to phone at same time - 8 am. Seems crazy since we can phone about other things at any time. I would prefer to book my appt online or by phone during normal hours



Phone call back I missed had to go back and ring and re-register again

Some GP practices used the "My health online" system where appointments could be booked and repeat prescriptions ordered.

One person found this to be disappointing, stating “I have also tried to book appointments via the health online app, there are never any available”. Some people would rather book an appointment online as they find it convenient, and it fits in with their lifestyle.

Allow forward appointments and online booking. Pure reliance on telephone booking is ridiculous. People have to get kids off to school and phone lines only open at 8am



People told us that, on occasions they were dissatisfied with the whole experience of trying to get through to the practice; once they managed to get through, they were annoyed that:-

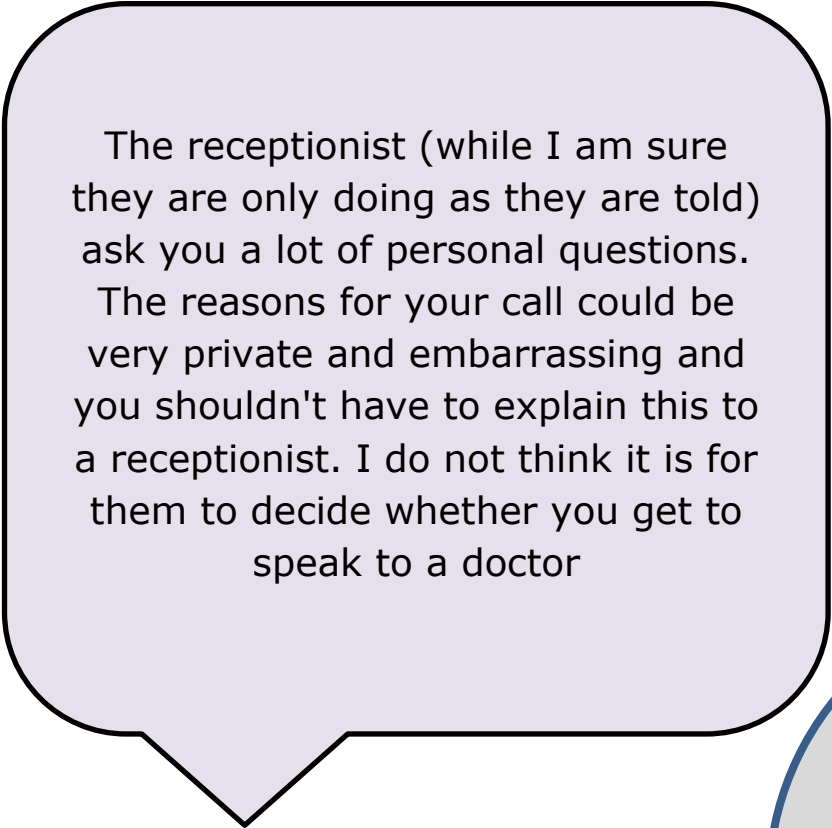
1. it took them so long and
2. that some receptionists were rude

This was not the experience of everyone that completed the survey. One person said “Receptionists show no compassion or empathy at all! Phone line constantly engaged and then you are put into a long queue. When you do get through eventually the receptionists are abrupt and dismissive and tell you there are no appointments and to ring back again for the same to happen again and again!”

One person stated that staff were helpful, saying “receptionist very efficient”.

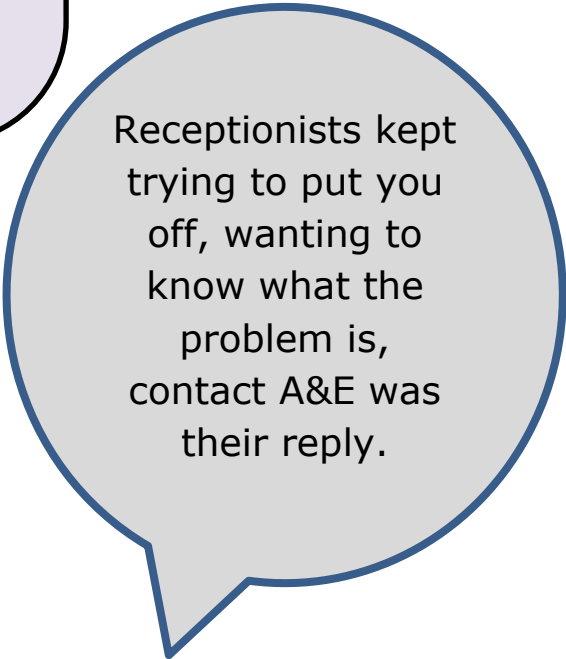
Reception staff are members of the practice team and are required by the practice they ask patients 'why they need to be seen?'. Reception staff are trained to ask certain questions to ensure that patients receive the most appropriate medical care from the most appropriate health professional at the most appropriate time.

Several people did not understand why receptionists asked questions regarding their symptoms finding them to be intrusive.



The receptionist (while I am sure they are only doing as they are told) ask you a lot of personal questions.

The reasons for your call could be very private and embarrassing and you shouldn't have to explain this to a receptionist. I do not think it is for them to decide whether you get to speak to a doctor



Receptionists kept trying to put you off, wanting to know what the problem is, contact A&E was their reply.

Learning from what we heard

General practice is usually the first point of contact for people accessing NHS services. The importance and value of their vital work during the pandemic should be recognised.

At the same time, it is true that patients' ability to access general practice is often not as good as it should be, with some patients experiencing unacceptable poor access, including not being able to contact practices for days as highlighted in the responses to our survey.

We have learned that most people who tried to access GP practices found it to be challenging, particularly first thing in the morning and for the more routine appointments.

We learned that while remote appointments were more convenient for some, they didn't meet everyone's needs, with some patients left "worried that their health problems would not be accurately diagnosed". For people with hearing/sight impairment, they could find telephone consultations difficult.

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



Some members of the public wanted video consultations, but this facility was not available in all practices.

We have learned that the public want a choice on how they have their GP consultation.

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 a number of patients to attend the surgery at the same time, due to the 2-metre rule and lack of space, with this said the public should have been informed of why it took so long to answer the phones.

Recommendations

01

GP practices should have available routine bookable face to face appointments.

02

GP practices need to train their reception staff to include explaining to the patients why they ask for symptoms. Receptionist should show empathy to patients and have time to speak to them in a professional manner.

03

Receptionists should not be telling patient's that there are no appointments left and to go to A&E unless life threatening as per GP's phone messages.

04

Practices should not be more favourable to phone appointments than face to face appointments. Going forward patients should have a choice of either phone or face to face appointments.

05

There should be equity of access within the Hywel Dda University Health Board area. It should not be dependent on which surgery you are registered with if you have easy access or not.

06

Investment should be made available for an easy user-friendly website, for people to navigate, this should include booking an appointment and accessing results.

07

People should be able to have video consultations if they so wish this should include pre-bookable video consultations.

08

GP practices should have bookable in advance appointments for those patients who have been asked to book a follow-up appointment by the GP or nurse rather than having to attempt to book an appointment on the day by telephone at 8am.

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 by 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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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.

Swyddfeydd Corfforaethol, Adeilad Ystwyth,
Hafan Derwen, Parc Dewi Sant, Heol Ffynnon Job,
Caerfyrddin, Sir Gaerfyrddin, SA31 3BB

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Cadeirydd /Chair
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

Hywel Dda Community Health Council