Tackling pressures and improving patient experience:

The case for upgrading GP websites

FUTURE HEALTH

CONTENTS

ABOUT FUTURE HEALTH

Founded by former UK Government Special Adviser, Richard Sloggett, Future Health is a policy research centre with a mission to advance public policy thinking that improves the health and wealth of people, communities and nations.

Healthcare systems around the world are facing significant challenges of demographic, societal and technological change. The importance of prevention and the development of new technologies have long been seen as ways to transform health systems to improve patient outcomes and performance, but progress has often been slow. COVID-19 is an inflection point, demonstrating the need and opportunity of investing in and delivering more effective and efficient healthcare services in the future. In undertaking cutting edge public policy research across key areas such as prevention, technology and links between healthcare and the wider economy, Future Health is working to support such positive changes and deliver policy that improves health outcomes and tackles health inequalities.

To find more about Future Health's work please do contact Richard Sloggett at richard@futurehealth-research.com

About the Author

Richard Sloggett is the Founder and Programme Director of Future Health. He was previously a Senior Fellow at Westminster's leading think tank Policy Exchange and from 2018-19 was Special Advisor to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. Richard is a regular commentator in the national media on health and social care including in The Times, Telegraph, Financial Times, Economist and on Times Radio and LBC. He has been named as one of the top 100 people in UK healthcare policy by the Health Service Journal.

During his time with the Secretary of State, Richard worked across Whitehall, the NHS and local government on major policy decisions including the NHS Long Term Plan, the Secretary of State's Technology Vision and the Prevention Green Paper. He has fifteen years' experience in public policy and healthcare, starting his career in Parliament before a successful career in public affairs where he led a team of 20 to the prestigious Communique Public Affairs Team of the Year Award.

Richard is undertaking his doctoral thesis in preventative healthcare systems at Liverpool University.

Executive Summary

Successive GP patient surveys have shown that there is an opportunity to dramatically improve the patient experience of GP websites[1]. Doing so could bring benefits both to patients through easier access to services and better signposting; and GP practices themselves by reducing unnecessary telephone calls and appointments at a time of significant pressure.

This Future Health research looked at 120 GP websites to assess the standard of information available to support self-care and self-referral, as well as functionality for patients wishing to carry out common tasks such as booking an appointment, ordering a prescription or requesting a fit note online.

The research found that there were common website templates used across different GP practices provided by around half a dozen providers. Despite this, the information and tools available for patients were highly variable. A third of practice websites were found to be inadequate in their functionality and ease of navigation. And many patients are still unable to book appointments, order repeat prescriptions or request a fit note without having to telephone their practice.

Looking across the sample, there are practices that have taken active steps to improve the standard of information available to patients on their website such as signposting to comprehensive health information and advice, as well as to other local NHS services.

If replicated nationally the research finds that:

- Over 10.5 million patients in England do not have access to an adequate GP website[2]
- 2200 GP websites either do not enable patients to book telephone or video appointments, or offer this service[3]
- Over 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[4]

With NHS services heading into a difficult winter, primary care experiencing record high volumes and more patients accessing and searching for health information online, improving GP websites could help reduce unnecessary calls to surgeries and help support patients.

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1   https://www.gp-patient.co.uk/
2   https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/patients-registered-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)
3   https://www.gponline.com/fifth-gp-practices-closed-merged-nhs-england-formed/article/1790429#:~:text=There%20are%20now%206%2C495%20GP,from%208%2C106%20in%20April%202013; Calculation based on 34% of 6495 GP practices
4   Calculation based on overall national patient list size 61,964,910, 55% of patients accessing practice information online, 2% of websites receiving this rating

To deliver the upgrade needed, a targeted investment at scale will be required. Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) should be assigned funding to work with their Primary Care Networks (PCNs) on upgrading websites in their region this winter, with a project manager appointed to oversee the process. Improvements should pay particular attention to the feedback received via the GP Patient Survey about website usability. These upgrades should also include the latest health, vaccination and pressures information. A pot of £5-10m should be assigned to the task[5]. This money could be resourced either from winter pressures funding or diverted underspend from within the Unified Tech Fund[6].

Background

General practice is facing mounting pressures due to workforce challenges, increased demand from patients and a wider NHS backlog resulting from Covid. On average every GP is responsible for 2,200 patients.[7] Research from the Royal College of GPs shows that there are now 1500 fewer qualified, full-time equivalent GPs than five years ago, with another 19,000 GPs expected to leave the profession over the next five years.[8]

Against this backdrop general practice is delivering more appointments but still failing to keep up with demand.[9] The most recent GP patient survey showed that only 56.2% of respondents reported a good overall experience of making an appointment (down from 70.6% in 2021 and 65.5% in 2020).[10] Worryingly it also showed that 26.5% of patients who needed an appointment said they had avoided making one in the last 12 months as they found it too difficult (up from 11.1% in 2021).[11]

An increasing number of people are using an online GP service. 55.1% of respondents had used an online general practice service in the past 12 months.[12] While this is an improvement on the year before (44.3% in 2021), this is still low when considering 90% of the UK public use the internet.[13] Of those who had used a GP online service, 21% had booked an appointment online and 31% ordered a prescription.[14] Over a third of patients reported that their GP website was either not very easy or not at all easy to use.[15]

5   £5-10m would provide close to £1000 per practice in England for the upgrade. In reality, practices will require different resource. Some practices will share their website and its updating across their Primary Care Network and some sites will require less resource as their website will already be mature and well developed.

6   https://transform.england.nhs.uk/digitise-connect-transform/unified-tech-fund/

7   https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/gp-nhs-doctors-figures-england-b2070278.html

8   https://www.rcgp.org.uk/News/Workforce-and-workload-data-response

9   https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/health-and-social-care-england-myths

10   https://www.gp-patient.co.uk/surveysandreports

11   https://www.gp-patient.co.uk/surveysandreports

12   https://www.gp-patient.co.uk/surveysandreports

13   https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocial-mediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04#:~:text=It%20estimates%20that%20the%20number,the%20five%20basic%20digital%20skills).

14   https://www.gp-patient.co.uk/surveysandreports

15   https://www.gp-patient.co.uk/surveysandreports

The 2021 British Social Attitudes survey showed that "satisfaction with GP services fell significantly, by 30 percentage points, from 68 per cent satisfied to 38 per cent since 2020".[16] 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. It would also help alleviate frustrations amongst the public by reducing the time queuing on GP phonelines.

Improving patient communications via websites was also recently highlighted as a key area for primary care to act upon as part of preparations for winter and beyond by NHS England.[17] This announcement included the publication of new guidelines: *Creating a highly usable and accessible GP website for patients* in September 2022.[18] These guidelines reiterate the importance of providing clear, concise information to patients which empower them to manage their own health and reduces the burden on receptionists and clinical staff.

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16 https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-03/BSA%20Survey%20Report%202nd%20pp_0.pdf
17 https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/B1998-supporting-general-practice-pcn-and-teams-through-winter-and-beyond-sept-22.pdf
18 https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/creating-a-highly-usable-and-accessible-gp-website-for-patients/

HEADLINE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Future Health has undertaken research into the standards of GP practice websites in England to assess the quality of information provided to patients with a particular focus on those elements which could reduce GP workload and empower patients in improved selfcare.

Healthwatch Manchester undertook a similar review of GP practice websites in their area in 2021 and while most performed well on basic information such as contact information, opening times and Covid information, many did not enable patients to book or cancel appointments easily or access wider information such as self-care advice, flu vaccinations and out of hours services.[19]

The absence of these website capabilities, appropriate information and signposting adds additional pressure to ever mounting practice workloads. As the NHS structures of ICSs and PCNs take shape there is a new opportunity for GP practices to effectively and efficiently update their websites to provide improved up to date information for patients.

Research findings

Future Health assessed 120 GP websites against a set of eight criteria.

In terms of overall website functionality and ease of navigation the research found that there was substantial room for improvement with almost a third of websites (31%) scoring between 0-2 out of 5 against the following areas of assessment:

- A clear website structure

- A highly usable primary navigation (menu)

- Has a search function

- Information provided is concise and up-to-date

- A homepage that is highly useable helping the patient navigate to what they need to find

2% of websites scored a rating of 0 against the criteria and only 20% of websites achieved a rating of 5, the highest available. Other research findings included:

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19 https://www.healthwatchmanchester.co.uk/report/2021-09-23/good-practice-review-gp-practice-websites

- Most GP websites are providing access to a secure online platform but functionality varies, with some sites only offering repeat prescriptions and not the ability to book appointments

- Over half of websites offer telephone consultations, but over a third offer neither telephone or video consultations

- Less than a third of websites offer patients an ability to request a fit note

- Patient information is variable. Over 50% of practices are providing links to comprehensive healthcare advice and support websites. Screening and vaccination information is only adequate on 13% of websites

- Nearly half of practices do not provide a comprehensive list of local health services for self-referral

- There is no discernable difference between the best and worst performing practices on the overall GP patient survey and the quality and level of information on their websites. The reasoning for this requires further investigation

A full overview of the methodology and research findings can be found below.

Implications and recommendations

Despite GP practices using templates from a small selection of providers, the quality and presentation of information for patients is variable.

The following updates would enhance the usability of GP websites for patients:

- Improving access to a secure platform where patients can book appointments, order repeat prescriptions or request a fit note without having to telephone the practice

- Linking through to comprehensive health information and advice, including on vaccination and screening

- Signposting to local NHS services which may be more appropriate for a patient to self-refer to such as pharmacies

- Offering more appointment options such a video consultations, particularly given the ongoing challenge of the pandemic and limited practice opening times for those patients who work full time

There is an opportunity for ICSs to work with their PCNs to now upgrade their websites this winter against the guidance set by NHS England[20]. A small fund to support these upgrades of £5-10m should ensure that more patients have access to better online information and access to services and help reduce pressures on GP practices.

GP website best practice examples

1

Case study one: Peartree Surgery and West Horndon Surgery
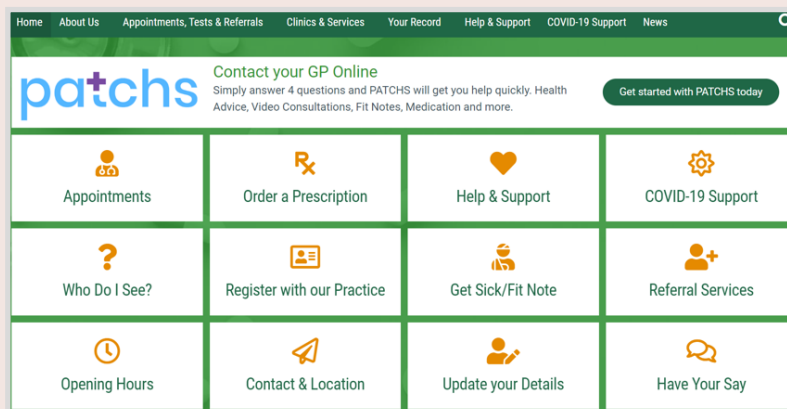
This website has a clear front page navigation helping patients quickly access the information they are likely to need including self-referral services. It also has a helpful primary navigation with clearly labelled titles providing additional information.

Website url: https://www.peartreesurgery.co.uk/

2

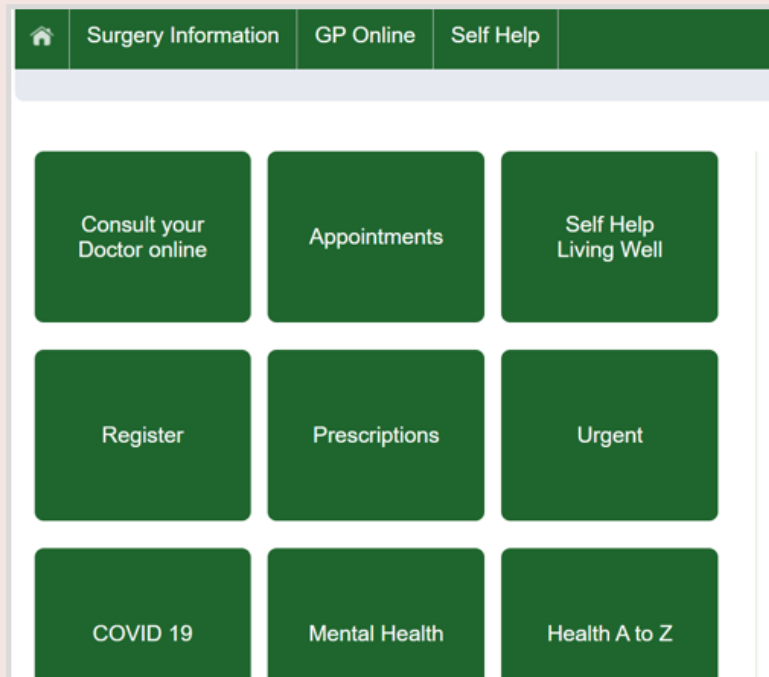### Case study two: The Limes Medical Centre
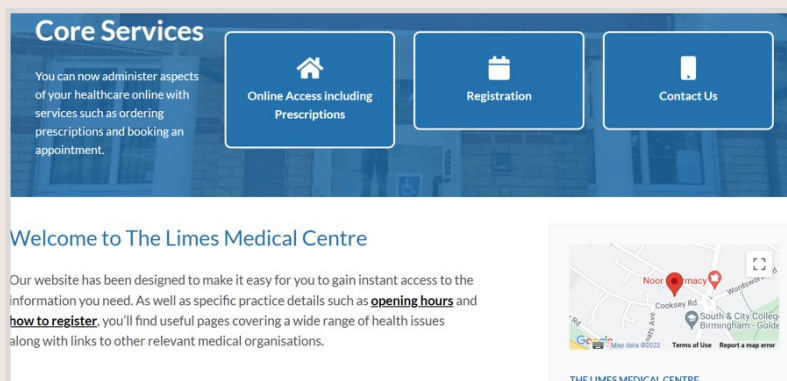
This website has minimal information on the front page so as not to overload the user with information. It helps patients navigate to commonly desired information such as contact information, opening hours and online access to book appointments / request prescriptions.

Website url: https://thelimesmedicalbirmingham.nhs.uk/

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20 https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/creating-a-highly-usable-and-accessible-gp-website-for-patients/

3

Case study three: Greens Valley Health

This website uses a helpful homepage navigation display to point patients in the direction of surgery services but also self-help information, particularly focusing on common issues such as Covid 19 and mental health.

Website url: https://www.greenvalleyshealth.nhs.uk/

METHODOLOGY:
THE RESEARCH APPROACH

A sample of 100 GP websites was determined as a suitable sample for the study. The 50 practices with the best and worst scores on the GP patient survey were selected for analysis. An additional 20 practices outside of this group were then randomly added to this as a control group and included within the final findings.

Websites were assessed against eight criteria (see below). The criteria were selected following a literature review and analysis of similar exercises from relevant organisations (e.g. Healthwatch).

1. Provides access to a secure online platform where patients can:

    i.   Manage appointments

    ii.   Order repeat prescriptions

    iii. Access medical notes (including test results)

Recording data:

    a.   Yes

    b.   No

    c.   Partially (will capture where an online platform provides some but not all of the services listed above)

2. Offering remote consultations

Recording data:

    a.   Telephone only

    b.   Video only

    c.   Telephone and video

    d.   None

3. Request fit notes online

Recording data:

    a.   Yes

    b.   No

4. Signpost comprehensive[21] healthcare advice either within their own site or by linking to NHS-approved sources

Data recording:

    a. Yes

    b. No

    c. Partial (not comprehensive)

5. Signpost to a comprehensive[22] list of local NHS services available to practice patients for self-referral

Recorded data

    a. Yes

    b. No

    c. Partial (not comprehensive)

6. Vaccination information

Recorded data:

    a. Yes

    b. No

    c. Partial (provides some information but not comprehensive)

7. Screening information

Recorded data:

    a. Yes

    b. No

    c. Partial (provides some information but t is not comprehensive)

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21 We define comprehensive as covering all common conditions
22 This includes details on other health services such as pharmacies, 111, dentists etc.

8. Is the website easy to navigate?

Recorded data:

Scale 1-5 with 1 being not easy and 5 being very easy. The following will be considered as part of the score[23]:

    i.   Clear website structure

    ii. Highly usable primary navigation (menu)

    iii. Has a search function

    iv. Information provided is concise and up-to-date

    v. Homepage is highly useable helping the patient navigate to what they need to find

The 120 GP practice websites which were assessed were taken from the most recent GP patient survey and included:

- 50 of the best overall performing GP practices
- 50 of the worst overall performing GP practices
- 20 mid-tier GP practices

The research was undertaken between 26th September 2022 and 4th October 2022.

23 Taken from NHS England published guidelines: Creating a highly usable and accessible GP website for patients

FULL RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. **Provides access to a secure online platform where patients can:**

- Manage appointments

- Order repeat prescriptions

- Access medical notes (including test results)

Almost three-quarters of practices offered access to a secure online platform where patients could book appointments, order repeat prescriptions and access their medical records. Just over a fifth of practices enabled patients to reorder prescriptions online but did not provide a facility to book appointments. A minority of practices (5%) did not offer access to any secure online platform to perform these activities.

*Figure 1: Access to an online platform to book appointments, request Prescription and access medical records*
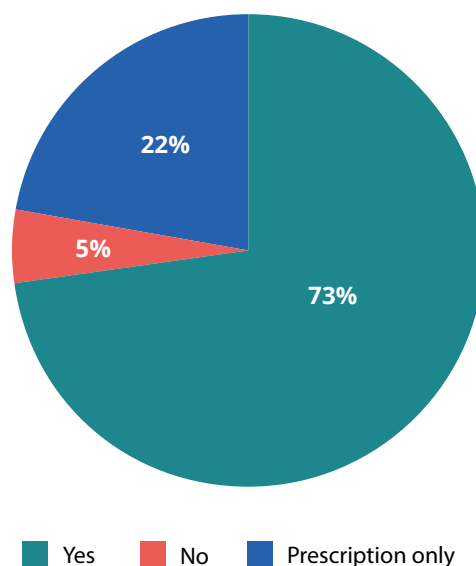
2. **Offering remote consultations:**

- Telephone only

- Video only

- Telephone and video

- Neither

Almost 50% of practices offered telephone only remote consultations. Only 18% offered both telephone and video consultations. The remaining 34% of practices either did not offer any remote consultations or failed to include this information on their website.

Figure 2: Remote consultations

Telephone and video · Telephone only · Neither
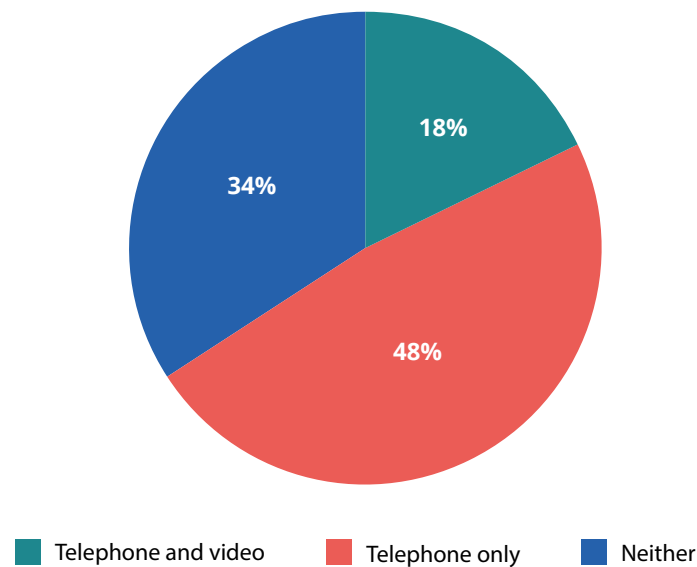
3. Request fit notes online

Only 28% practices provided patients with the ability to request a fit note online. Poor performing GP practices on the GP patient survey were more than twice as likely to provide an online form to request a fit note than those from the best performing and mid-tier groups.

Figure 3: Request fit note online

Yes · No
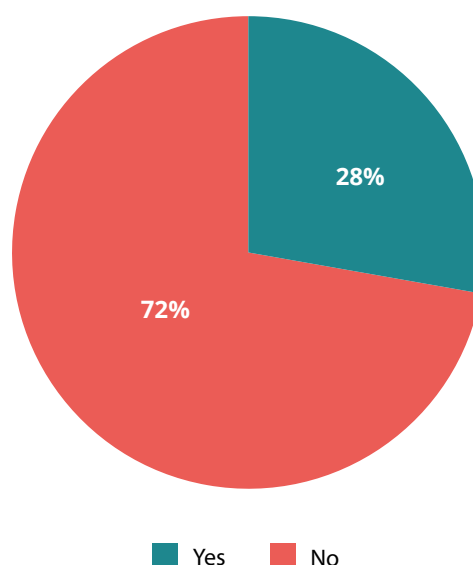
4. Signpost comprehensive[24] healthcare advice either within their own site or by linking to NHS-approved sources

The vast majority of practices signposted to either comprehensive healthcare advice (54%) or partial advice (33%). The majority of websites who provided comprehensive healthcare advice signposted the NHS A-Z of health conditions. While those who only provided partial advice tended to host this information locally on their own website. 13% of websites did not signpost or host any healthcare advice for patients whatsoever.

The best and worst performing practices on the GP patient survey returned similar results.

Figure 4: Signpost healthcare advice

Legend: ■ Yes ■ No ■ Partially
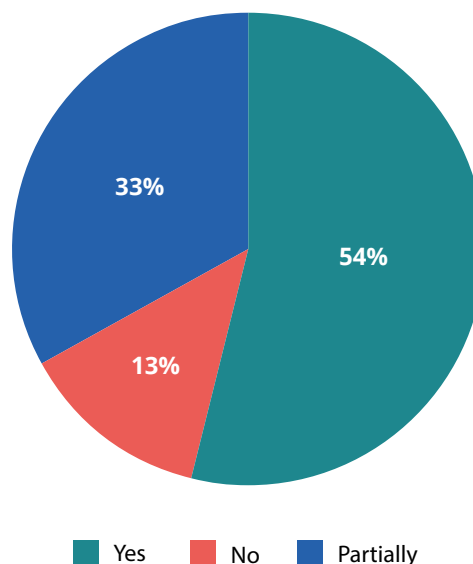
5. Signpost to a comprehensive[25] list of local NHS services available to practice patients for self-referral

Almost half of the practice websites did not provide any signposting to local NHS services whatsoever. Only 32% provided a comprehensive list of local services or provided a facility for patients to input their own postcode to search for services. A fifth of websites provided partial information such as local pharmacies and/or A&E details.

There was no significant difference between the performance of different groups of GP practices for this criteria.

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24 We define comprehensive as covering all common conditions
25 This includes details on other health services such as pharmacies, 111, dentists etc.

Figure 5: Signposting local NHS services
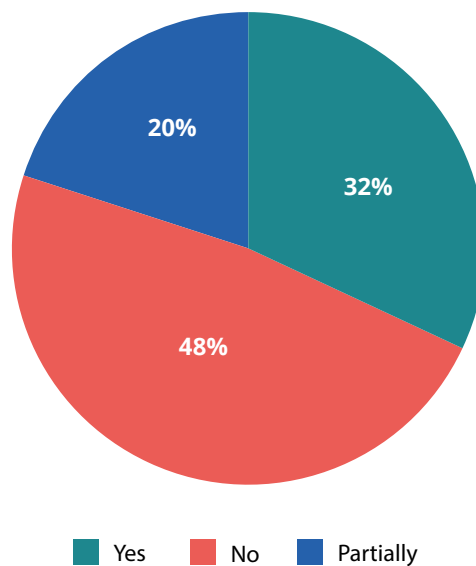
6. **Vaccination information**

Just under half of websites (47%) provided partial information on vaccinations. This tended to focus on Covid, flu and childhood immunisations. Only 13% of practices signposted to NHS pages on vaccination schedules or provided a comprehensive search function. A significant 40% of practices had no information on vaccinations.

The worst performing practices on the GP patient survey performed slightly better with regards to providing information on vaccination than the best performing group of GP practices.

Figure 6: Vaccination information
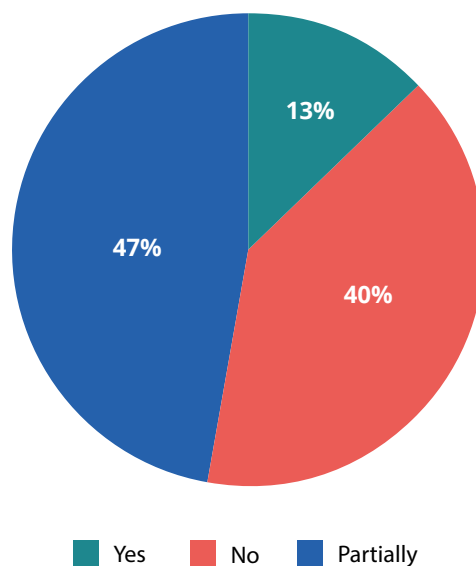
7. Screening information

Almost half of practices (48%) did not include any information on screening services. Just over half of practices provided full (13%) or partial (39%) information on health screening. Where information was provided partially, this was often focused on cervical screening – a service that GP practices deliver themselves.

Figure 7: Screening information

Legend: ▮ Yes ▮ No ▮ Partial
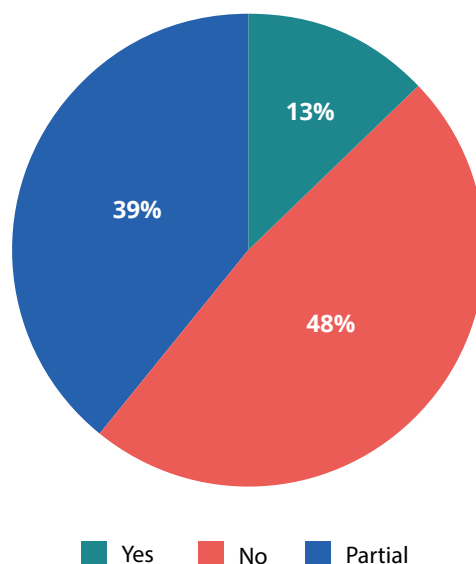
8. Is the website easy to navigate?

A scale of 1-5 with 0 being not easy and 5 being very easy was used to score each website. The following attributes were considered as part of the score[26]:

a. Clear website structure

b. Highly usable primary navigation (menu)

c. Has a search function

d. Information provided is concise and up-to-date

e. Homepage is highly useable helping the patient navigate to what they need to find

A fifth of the websites achieved a full score having fulfilled all five criteria. Perhaps surprisingly poor performing GP practice groups on the GP patient survey had a higher proportion of websites (13) within this top score category than the best performing group of practices (8).

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26 Taken from NHS England published guidelines: Creating a highly usable and accessible GP website for patients

31% of practices scored 0-2 indicating a need to substantially improve their website functionality and navigation for patients. There was no significant difference between the best (17) and worst performing GP practices on the GP patient survey (18) scoring 0-2.

Figure 8: How easy was the website to navigate?

Not easy ——————————————————— Easy
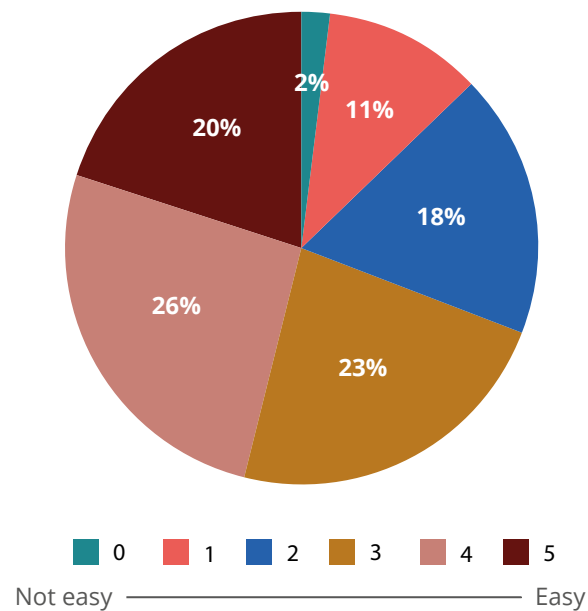
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