

An open letter to people living in Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire

It's no secret that GP practices in our area are incredibly busy right now, and while we know this may cause some to have concerns about not being able to access care, we want to reassure our communities that we are open.

However, the pressure we are currently seeing, which stems from a mixture of staff absences, increasing numbers of coronavirus cases and an increase in demand for urgent and emergency care, means we are working in conditions not usually seen outside the middle of winter.

During August, which is the last full month for which statistics are available, GP practices in our area carried out more than 366,000 appointments, of which more than half (56 per cent) took place in person.

This is up by more than 50,000 when compared to August of last year, which means our teams are now providing around 2,400 more appointments each day.

We know some patients have struggled recently to get through to their practice, and we know this hasn't been ideal, but please be assured that our practices are open, as they have been throughout the entirety of the pandemic.

Coronavirus meant that we had to adapt the way we offered appointments, so that we could continue to see patients in a way that kept both patients and our practice staff safe.

This meant carrying out more telephone and video consultations, which many patients told us they preferred, especially at this current time.

As well as preventing the need for people to travel, remote appointments give people the convenience of being able to be seen and treated within their own home or at work, while also helping us to avoid having crowded waiting rooms in our practices.

That does not mean in-person discussions are no longer available – they absolutely are – especially for people with potentially serious health concerns.

Our GP practices will always offer appointments, either face to face, or via remote consultation, with the health and care professional most appropriate for a patient's needs.

We know that people have been hugely supportive of us throughout the pandemic, and we truly appreciate this, but it's important to remember that Covid-19 has not gone away, and we still need your help.

When our receptionists ask questions on the phone, this is not a barrier, but an important process to ensure that people are cared for in the most appropriate way, and by the most appropriate professional, such as a physiotherapist, mental health nurse or phlebotomist, all of whom are experts in their area.

So please be kind, and remember that our administrative teams are here to help, just as much as our clinicians.

Staying home when feeling under the weather, as well as visiting a local pharmacy for minor illnesses and injuries, keeps more appointments available for those who really need them.

Many pharmacies also have a private treatment room for confidential consultations and discussions, which can usually be had without an appointment.

NHS 111 online is a great tool for those thinking about accessing care, but unsure of where to go, as the service provides information and advice specific to a person's symptoms and, where appropriate, directions to other healthcare options.

By taking these steps, as well as taking personal precautions such as having vaccinations for Covid-19 and flu, if eligible, you will be playing your part in supporting your local practice during this exceptionally busy time.

Our health services are under enormous pressure, but we are open and available.

Please continue to play your part by being kind to our staff, socially distancing where possible and wearing a face covering in all healthcare settings.

Thank you.

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