

GP Practices - adjustment to services in Sandwell in response to Covid-19

July 2020



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Introduction

Healthwatch Sandwell (HWS) are the independent voice of the public in health and social care services. We collect feedback from people using health and social care services in Sandwell about their experiences and undertake focused work to gain insights. We share the information with service commissioners and providers to look for ways to improve services.

The Coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic brought about sudden, unplanned changes to health and care services across the UK. The primary care services of General Practitioner (GP), pharmacy, dental, and optometry across Sandwell responded promptly to implementing changes. This included district wide adjustments to the GP Practice model within the local Primary Care Networks (PCN) to manage Covid-19 risks.

HWS had a role to play in response to these changes, including ensuring the public were aware and informed on services available to them. HWS have worked collaboratively with stakeholders from the outset of Covid-19 to help achieve clear information sources and provide guidance and signposting to services for the public.

From April 2020 to June 2020 HWS undertook a focused piece of work to establish the overall picture of the GP services on offer in Sandwell in the early phases of Covid-19 and the patients experiences of the GP services. This provided insight that could be helpful for informing and developing services. This report reflects the information gathered.

The report will also feed into priority project work for HWS during 2020/21. HWS, in collaboration with the Primary Care Networks in Sandwell, will be engaging with and seeking feedback from the public on using digital technology in Primary Care Services.

Comments on this report or sharing of experiences to help inform this work would be welcomed.

Objective

HWS sought to establish the picture of GP Practice services available in Sandwell following the adjustments made in response to Covid-19. The results gathered were used to help inform and guide members of the public in accessing and using GP services and in obtaining prescriptions.

Contacting the GP Practices presented an opportunity to also consider services to Covid-19 “shielded” category patients. HWS were involved from the early stages in signposting and linking people up with transport, food and medicine provisions, welfare calls and support services that were on offer from Sandwell Council and the Community and Voluntary sector. HWS were able to support some of the GP Practices by providing helpful information and links to these services for social prescribing.

Due to Covid-19 service changes members of the public have had to adjust to consultations with health professionals being predominantly by phone or video call and often not from their own GP Practice. Previous community engagement work with the public has indicated a resistance from some people to using technology and many people expressing preference for seeing a health professional face to face. The service changes brought about by Covid-19 presented an opportunity to look at the public experience of using technology for health services and gain some insight to inform the more detailed HWS project work proposed for 2020/21.

Methodology

HWS contacted 64 GP Practices in Sandwell, a 51.5% direct response rate was achieved. Contact was by phone and email to the Practice Managers where possible. In response to Covid-19 measures many staff had adjusted working arrangements, including working from home or in different GP Practices. Additional information was also gathered through HWS undertaking direct research.

A questionnaire tool was designed to enable conversations and to ensure information capture of service changes. The content of GP Practice telephone voicemail recordings and online websites is a main source of public access information and therefore an important aspect for HWS to consider. HWS listened to and considered the content of a selection of the telephone service recordings. HWS also accessed and reviewed the information of GP Practice websites and NHS information websites for 78% of the database.

The Sandwell and West Birmingham Clinical Commissioning Group (SWB CCG) provided Healthwatch Sandwell with a status classification rating chart for the GP Practices in Sandwell. The status reflected the operating position of each Practice during the Covid-19 lockdown phase. The range of services is reflected within this report.

Findings

The findings of the report can be divided into the following categories and are summarised under these headings:

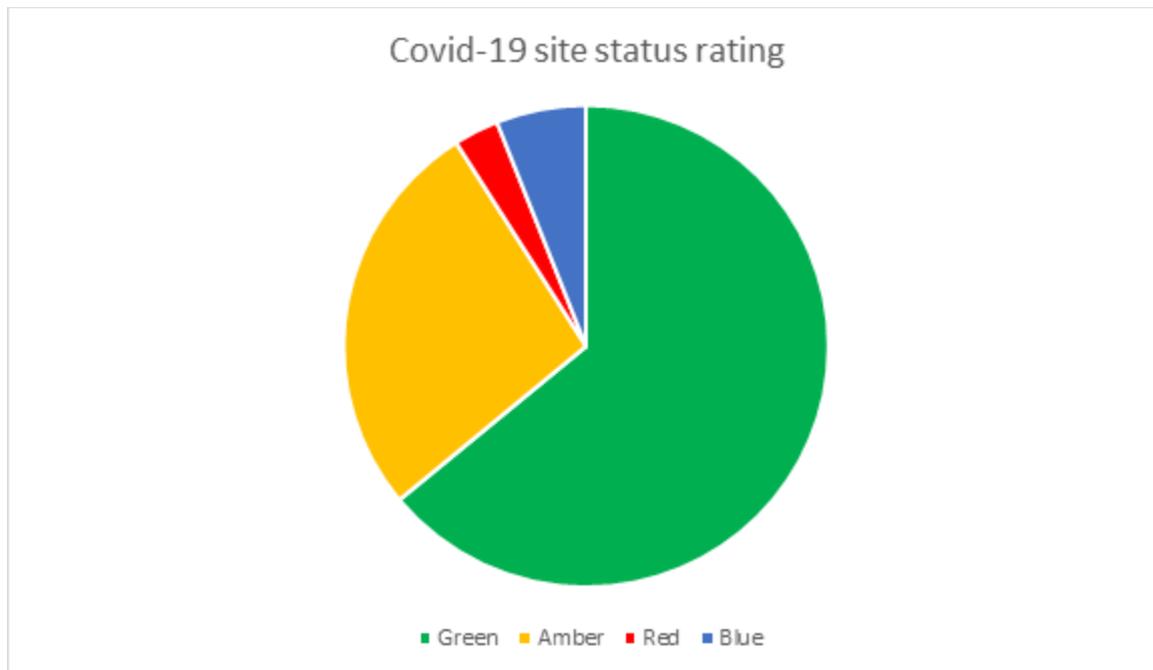
1. Covid-19 site status rating
2. Information on services
3. Appointments
4. Patient engagement and support

Covid-19 site status rating

The Sandwell and West Birmingham CCG applied a status classification rating chart for the GP Practices in Sandwell as per the chart below. (PCN = Primary Care Network which are GP Practices working together as a local network).

RED Sites (COVID Risk High/ Confirmed - Hot sites) SWB Primary Care Assessment Centre <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parsonage Street• Aston Pride• Patient cannot be managed virtually and requires face to face assessment	Amber Sites – (COVID Risk Low/Med) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• PCN identified site(s)• Patient cannot be managed virtually and requires face to face assessment (including Immunisation clinics)
Green Sites (Remote Primary Care management /Cold Sites) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Closed to patients• Remote clinical consultations• Administration activity (including medication tasks that do not require direct patient contact)	Blue Sites (Closed with no activity) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Standby site to become Red sites if required• Deep clean to be undertaken and infection control measures to be followed before site re-activated.

Healthwatch Sandwell (HWS) were able to establish the site status rating on 33 (51.5%) of the GP Practices and obtained feedback on how the services were running. 64% of these sites had a Green status, 27% had an Amber status, 6% had a Blue status (so were temporarily closed) and **Parsonage Street** was the Red status site.



All the Practice Managers that HWS communicated with were very helpful and knowledgeable about the Practice operations brought about by the Covid-19 changes. This included awareness of, and connection to, the network of services such as other Practices to direct patients to including the **Parsonage Street** Covid-19 high risk "Red" site.

HWS asked the Practice Managers how well services were operating and whether they had any issues or concerns:

Some GP Practices informed HWS on adjustments made to their staff structure. HWS were told that staff with pre-existing medical conditions who were not in "shielded" categories but could be at higher risk from Covid-19 had been reallocated to non-public facing roles. This helped with covering administration and back up services such as telephone calling to "shielded" and other vulnerable patients. Where possible staff were working from home.

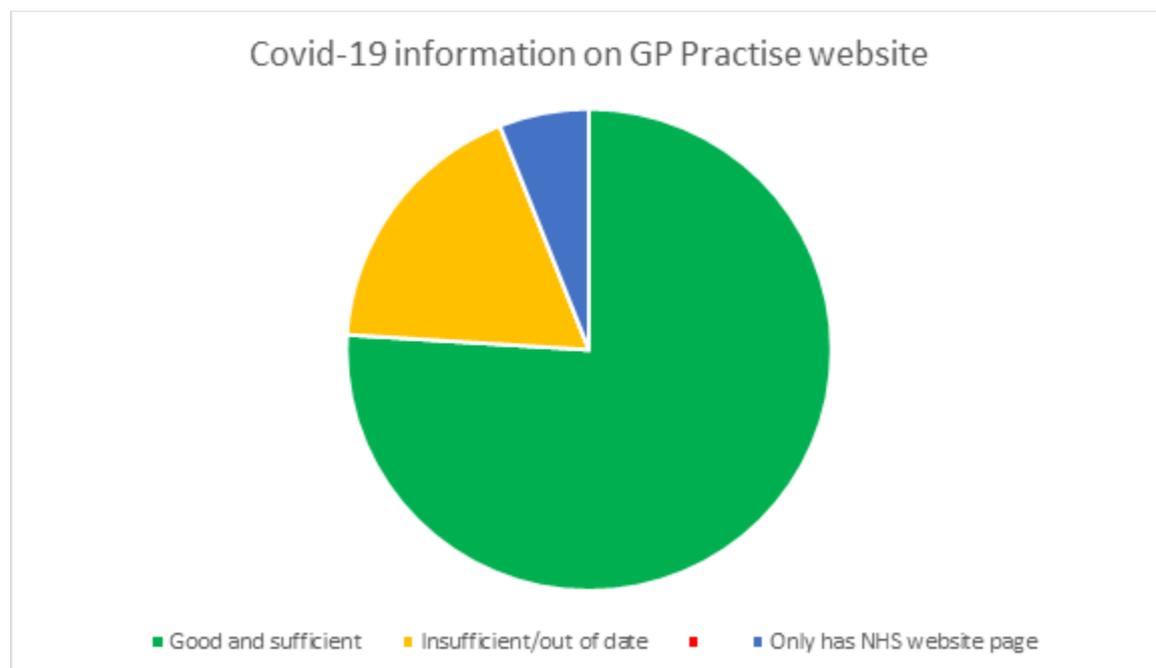
No concerns were expressed by the Practice Managers about operation of the GP Practices. However, a Doctor spoken with from **Your Health Partnership** expressed concern about the risk of patients choosing not to contact services or address other health issues during Covid-19. This is recognised nationally as a likely consequence of Covid-19 but does not form part of this report.

HWS spoke to the Operations Manager for the [Parsonage Street](#) Covid-19 “Red” site and obtained an overview on the service provision. The site which normally provides the Sandwell walk-in GP services had been closed to general public access and was operating as a GP service for patients testing positive for Covid-19 or showing Covid-19 symptoms who were needing face to face treatment for other conditions. Referral was via triage from the GP Surgeries in Sandwell. Feedback given was that the service had operated at manageable levels with 479 referrals and appointments held over the 3 months lockdown period provided by 2 to 4 clinicians with appointments available Monday to Friday 11am – 6.30 pm. There had been some initial inappropriate referrals which settled down and later some increased non-attendance thought to be due to vehicle access and car parking issues exacerbated by the reopening of the McDonalds drive through next door.

Information on services

HWS looked at 50 (78%) of the GP Practice database websites and www.nhs.uk pages for the GP Practices. These sites are the main source of information about services for the public so HWS reviewed the content with that in mind.

76% of the GP Practice websites viewed provided good or sufficient information on changes to services resulting from Covid-19 though the quality and content varied. Many websites also included central Government guidance and information on Covid-19 pop up screens on their opening page. 18% of the GP Practice websites viewed either did not reflect the service changes due to Covid-19 or had insufficient information. For 6% a GP Practice website could not be located. All GP Practices had a page on www.nhs.uk site but 20% did not appear to reflect the GP Practice changes to services due to Covid-19 and one GP Practice website link was noted to be broken.



A GP Practice website that stood out for clear, simple, comprehensive information on service changes and Covid-19, including central Government pop up information was [New Street Surgery, West Bromwich](https://www.newstreetsurgerywestbromwich.co.uk/)
<https://www.newstreetsurgerywestbromwich.co.uk/>

As well as an inconsistency in standard of information about the GP Practices on the NHS website HWS noted that there was not a fixed location area provided for service changes on the NHS pages, some were on the front page and some on news link tabs at the top of the page.

HWS also paid attention to the recorded messages on the telephone answering services for GP Surgeries contacted. It was noted that some GP Surgeries had unnecessarily long recorded messages which sometimes repeated the Covid-19 guidance in slightly different words. A couple were noted to, after several minutes of message recording, state if the situation was an emergency “hang up and dial 999”. Two were noted to state that prescriptions could not be obtained by phone but did not specify how to do so instead. Some GP Surgeries were redirecting to other services, though some did not provide the contact phone numbers.

Appointments and Consultations

Many patients ordinarily access bookings for appointments by visiting the GP Practice, however during Covid-19 lock down this option had been removed. All GP Practices had a phone number with a recorded message service, a small number of these recorded messages did not lead to access to a receptionist to book an appointment, but these were deemed to be closed or relocated services. In most cases the recorded phone message access route to booking an appointment was lengthy as highlighted in the previous section. 42% of GP Practices directly communicated with were noted to offer on-line appointment booking services but the actual percentage offering this route may be higher.

Face to face consultations and home visits have been provided to patients where necessary after triage from sites set up to do so. 85% of GP Practices responded to say they were providing consultation services by telephone and 60% responded that they were conducting video calls. One GP Practice mentioned providing a consultation service via e mail.

3 GP Practices mentioned using apps such as Push Doctor and Econsult and 6 were noted to be promoting the Sandwell and West Birmingham Health app that was developed during Covid-19 <https://app.swbhealthapp.com/splash>

An alternative primary care service is the NHS111 phone number and on-line services. With the increased promotion of NHS111 during Covid-19 some patients may have utilised these services instead of accessing their GP Practice services. HWS remind patients NHS 111 is an option and promote the services on offer in relation to Covid-19.

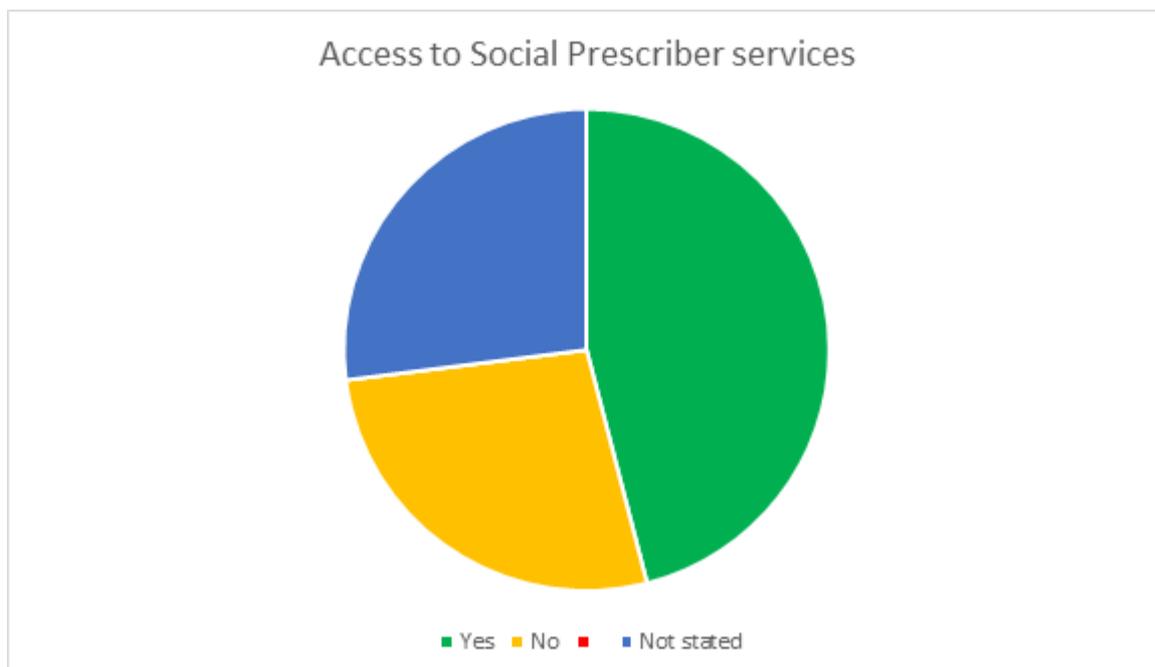
Prescription services were noted to be working well overall with GP Practices sending the prescriptions electronically to designated pharmacies, one practice mentioned prescribing for a 6-month supply for appropriately identified patients.

HWS asked the GP Practices about their “GP Connect” data sharing system and in all cases the GP Practices reported it was working well.

Patient engagement and support

HWS asked the GP Practices about their progress on contacting their “shielded” patients as directed by NHS England. Most GP Practices had phoned all the shielded category patients on their list and some were progressing on to contacting other known vulnerable patients. One surgery stated they had written to all shielded patients and were also phoning the most vulnerable patients. Some GP Practices were following up with ongoing calls to some vulnerable patients.

In the early stages of Covid-19 awareness of options for patients in need of support with food, medical prescriptions or welfare calls and the referral routes for support were still being established. HWS noted that some GP Surgeries were less clear than others on the information and services available. HWS provided advice to these GP Surgeries and followed up with e mail information links to services. HWS asked if GP Practices had access or links to a Social Prescriber service - 46% said Yes, whereas 27% said No, 27% did not complete the question, which may suggest some lack of awareness of the service or role. It was interesting to note that some GP Practices told HWS about other support roles provided within their service, [Haden Vale Medical Practice](#) offer an Elderly Care Co-ordinator and [Cape Hill Medical Centre](#) offer a Chaplain/Counsellor service.



HWS also enquired about Patient Participation Groups (PPG) and whether any were finding a way to operate during Covid-19 lock down. None of the GP Practices had yet been able to establish a way of holding a PPG with the constraints presented by Covid-19. HWS had further conversation with some of the Practice Managers advising that the HWS Community Outreach Leads would welcome working together in the future to seek to establish some virtual engagement to collect feedback from patients.

Conclusion

The Coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic caused a sudden and massive impact on all health and care services. The primary care services responses in Sandwell to deal with the situation and enable continuity of service to patients appears to have been swift and focused on priorities of health, safety and vulnerable patients such as those shielding. Understandably though, service changes took a little while to fully establish and settle in. GP Practice staff across Sandwell deserve recognition for their flexibility and commitment to keeping services and the offer to patients running during these challenging times.

HWS have provided guidance to members of the public who were confused about the GP services on offer, unsure about accessing services or needed signposting to support services. In the main it appears that the new shape of services has become the established “normal” for now and more recent feedback from patients indicates better clarity and acceptance of the primary care options and support services available to them within Sandwell.

A secondary, but very important aspect, of the service changes is communication. Information on services available to patients should be clear, concise, and up to date. Links to Government information on Covid-19 is very acceptable rather than reiterating messages. HWS noted an inconsistency in the content and quality of information on GP Practice websites, NHS link pages for the GP Practices, and recorded phone messages used for accessing booking to appointments. Now that the initial responses to Covid-19 have passed and services are established it could be a good time to review the validity of the information provided.

Patient engagement and feedback on services is very important and, perhaps now more than ever, helpful to informing and developing services going forwards. It is widely recognised that some of the adjustments in working practices that have been made in response to Covid-19 and lock down may be worth retaining. Within Sandwell pre Covid-19 there had been a demonstrable reluctance from some members of the public to engage with remote, including digital, methods of accessing GP services. The Covid-19 situation has enforced changes to health appointment and consultation services that may be beneficial and timely to develop upon. HWS will be engaging further with the public about using digital technology in Primary Care Services in priority project work for 2020/21. HWS are planning to work in collaboration with the Primary Care Networks in Sandwell on the project. HWS would welcome any interest in involvement in the project – contact details are at the end of this report.

Future consideration

HWS undertook the work outlined within this report in response to swift changes in primary care services necessitated by the Coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic. The report hopefully provides some useful insights but is not a comprehensive body of work. Therefore, firm recommendations are not included within the report but a summary of key points that might bear future consideration are outlined below:

1.
Review content validity and comprehensiveness of information on GP websites and update as necessary
2.
Consider the possibility of standardising NHS GP Practice pages Covid-19 information
3.
Review the patient experience of recorded message routes to access appointments
4.
Gather feedback on the SWB Health app
5.
Review knowledge of and working links for Social Prescribing service options.
6.
Work with Healthwatch Sandwell on the patient engagement and feedback project looking at “using digital technology in primary care services”
7.
Consider opportunities for working with Healthwatch Sandwell on engaging patients on primary care services delivered during Covid-19 and planning for future services including via PPG’s and Community Outreach work

Thank You

Healthwatch Sandwell would like to Thank all the Sandwell GP Practices staff that assisted in the collation of information on service adjustments in response to Covid-19, enabled support to patients within Sandwell and contributed to the contents of this report.

To feedback your comments on this report, for more information or to be involved in the HWS project “Using digital technology in Primary Care Services” please contact:

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