

## Appointment system – Ongoing improvements by the practice

We are always monitoring our appointment system and make regular changes to improve capacity and effectiveness as much as is possible. Staff, clinicians and patients are involved in this process and patient feedback is always welcomed. We have a “comments and suggestions” link on our website and a post-box to drop-in these comments at the surgery.

### Background

There are a number of mandatory requirements of the appointment system which we have to adhere to under our NHS contract. In addition there are a number of external requirements from the Clinical Commissioning Group and other organisations placing demands on clinician’s time, which we have to accommodate. When this is considered alongside our local population’s specific needs, it is a fine balancing act. As the longest established practice in the area we have a large cohort of patients with multiple complex needs for whom we make every effort to provide the tailored care needed. We also have a large number of care homes in Potters Bar and have taken steps to ensure that a proportionate amount of clinician’s time is dedicated to their specific needs.

We are not unique in our experience of high demand for appointments. There has been extensive national press coverage regarding the pressure that General Practice and the wider NHS are facing.

### What are we doing?

Our efforts to provide an appointment system that meets the needs of patients are extensive. Through discussion with our PPG and review of wider patient feedback we have made many changes over the years. These include but are not limited to:

- Increasing the number of appointments that can be booked online
- Increasing the length of time ahead that appointments can be booked
- Reviewing our business model and increasing the number of clinicians available to patients. We now have up to 12 GPs working at any one time. We are working at capacity and have no consulting space unused.
- Upskilling clinicians to free-up GP time to care for the more serious and complex cases
- Covering clinician leave with locum staff as much as possible to ensure there is no drop in capacity
- Upskilling reception staff to signpost patients to the most appropriate service or clinician for their needs
- Upskilling staff to take-on admin work previously done by GPs; freeing-up their time to see patients
- Training and employing more phlebotomists to avoid the need to patients to attend hospital for blood tests
- Creating telephone appointments for patient convenience and practice efficiency. We are currently undertaking a large piece of work to further improve the use of these appointments
- Encouraging and equipping patients to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing, providing education and support for self-care
- Providing facilities with the support of the PPG, to enable the taking of basic measurements such as blood pressure and BMI machines in the waiting room, avoiding the need for an appointment
- Always looking for innovative ways to meet patient need and demand. We tried a ground breaking appointment system in 2014 called DoctorFirst where every patient wishing to consult with a GP was managed the same day. This system was popular with many patients as there was no wait for a GP but there were a large number of patients who felt fast access was not their main priority and preferred the booked appointments system. The GPs were dealing with up to 300 patients a day which was incredibly challenging and took its toll on the health and wellbeing of the GPs. We decided to move back to a more traditional appointment system to ensure we could maintain the high standard of medical care provided to our patients.
- Provision of a ‘commuter clinic’ since 2000, in the early mornings and at weekends, long before there was national funding for this service and it became commonplace in most practices in 2013
- Valuing patient feedback and opinion since 1998 when The Friends of Parkfield PPG was first set-up, some 17 years before PPGs became a contractual requirement of GP Practices in 2015

We regularly benchmark our systems against national recommendations. Our staffing levels for GP, other clinical posts and administrative staffing groups as well as the number of appointments we offer meet or exceed the national standards.

### **What we need from patients**

There are a number of ways that patients can meet their responsibilities and help the system to run as smoothly as possible:

- Please always cancel your appointment if you cannot attend. We now have a dedicated mobile number to cancel your appointment via text message
- Please be mindful that most of our GPs are part-time and so you may not always be able to consult with the GP of your choice
- Please remember that GPs do need to take holiday and sometimes have emergencies or fall unwell themselves
- Please be a patient patient. Some patients may need more than their allotted 10 minute appointment and so clinics can therefore run late. The clinician will give every patient the time their problem deserves
- Please bring only one problem per 10 minute appointment
- Please make full use of the wider clinical team. You may feel that you need to see a GP for your problem when in fact it may be far more beneficial for you to see someone else, such as a clinical pharmacist. We will signpost you to the most appropriate clinician
- Please use our telephone appointment for problems that do not require a face-to-face consultation, medication reviews for example
- Please be considerate to our staff and give them the respect they deserve
- If you have any suggestions or compliments about the practice, please let us know. If you have reason to make a complaint, please follow the complaints procedure which can be obtained from reception or on our website

We continue to struggle with a large number of appointments that are not attended (DNAs). The practice continues to send SMS text message reminders of booked appointments and offers online appointment management and cancellation via text message to avoid the need to contact the busy reception desk. Sadly the numbers of patient not cancelling their unwanted appointment continues to be disappointingly high which has an impact on the availability of appointments to those who need them. There are times when clinics and appointments need to be rearranged at short notice. This is usually due to unforeseeable reasons such as sickness. We always try to cover lost sessions as much as possible and apologise sincerely to patients when inconvenience arises.

### **What we will continue to do**

Our appointment system is formally discussed every month where patient feedback is reviewed. The partners and staff contribute towards the identification of areas that we are able to improve. We meet with our PPG regularly to discuss the appointment system and all other elements of the practice. We welcome feedback through our PPG, website feedback form and the comments and suggestions box at reception.

Efforts to ensure that the needs of all patients are taken into account whilst ensuring the system is equitable and safe are and will remain a top priority for the practice.