

Heathgate Medical Practice
Patient information

Preparing for autumn and winter

Patient expectation and demand for contact with the Practice remains at an all-time high. In the 12 months to 31st August 2026, our clinicians saw 44,400 patients in face-to-face appointments and spoke with 12,700 patients on the telephone following requests for such or a same day need assessment.

It is a shame that over 1,500 patients did not keep their appointments over the same 12-month period, which prevented other patients using those consultations.

We are about to enter a busy autumn/winter period and we have been planning our approach for several weeks now, consulting with patients and staff about how we can support patients appropriately during this period, stay well ourselves and ensure our service remains safe and appropriate.

The Practice team has grown over the past few years with allied healthcare professionals, such as first contact physiotherapists, social prescribers, mental health practitioners, pharmacists, pharmacy technicians, nurse practitioners and paramedics joining our team of GPs, nurses and healthcare assistants. This wider team is a large investment by the Practice and to help manage patient demand, it has been key that we signpost patients to the appropriate clinician rather than simply book patients with the GP. The experience of the wider team should leave us in a great position to support patients needs.

This though is against the backdrop of pressure across the NHS with very often other specialist services directing patients back to us when their service is unable to support patients.

One of the biggest challenges we have is patient expectation, with greater pressure on being seen or contacted sooner than perhaps clinically necessary, so we have needed to make larger provision in the number of same day contact appointments available each day, reducing those for booking ahead at an agreed date. This is not sustainable for safe care and clinician wellbeing. It is not always fair that some patients accept booking ahead and are prepared to wait whilst others who shout louder are seen sooner.

We are, therefore, planning to change our appointment system to book routine appointments two weeks ahead, rather than four, with appointments released each week for the following two weeks. Our research shows that this is likely to also help reduce the wasted and lost clinical time in appointments which are not kept.

To achieve this, we need to pause booking routine appointments for a couple of weeks, offering alternative methods of support during that period. Our reception team can share these options with you. We have made additional provision in our clinics to do this and we have chosen to introduce this change when we have little annual leave for our clinicians, so we have good resource available.

Moving ahead, we will be withdrawing direct booking into GP appointments online. Requests can still be made on the telephone where our front-line team will consider which clinician from within the wider team is best suited to meet patients' need. The GPs have asked our reception team to run some questions with patients to help identify the best person or service to support them.

Our digital online consultation service will remain, with patients able to request routine advice and support via our website. These contacts will be reviewed within 5 days and a plan shared with patients. This could lead to a telephone call or a face-to-face appointment. We are not like some Practices restricting all access via an online form or introducing automatic AI (artificial intelligence) robot receptionists to assess and signpost patients to different services.

We will be making greater use of the Pharmacy First service which the Government has invested in to support GP surgeries by directing patients with one of seven clinical conditions to a Pharmacy where a Community Pharmacist can help with a patient's need.

We will return to booking routine appointments mid-October for early November. Our clinicians will also have a mechanism for booking direct follow up with patients if required, allocating appointments within their clinics when they are available.

Thank you for helping us help you over what we expect to be a busy and challenging NHS autumn and winter period.

During this period our staff will treat patients with respect and we look to the same from our patients, with a zero-tolerance approach.