

**Waiting Room**

# **Modern General Practice: Mystery Shop**

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## Who are Healthwatch East Sussex?

Healthwatch East Sussex (HWES) are the local independent watchdog for health and social care services. We gather feedback from residents, good, bad and mixed, and make recommendations to change services for the better.

If you have used a health or care service, please tell us about your experience by leaving a review on our Feedback Centre:

<https://healthwatcheastsex.co.uk/services/>

If you need support in accessing health and care services, please contact our Information & Signposting service by:

Visiting: <https://healthwatcheastsex.co.uk>

Emailing: [enquiries@healthwatcheastsex.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@healthwatcheastsex.co.uk)

Calling: 0333 101 4007

# 1. Context and aims

## 1.1 Background

Healthwatch East Sussex (HWES) have been regularly hearing about patients and the public struggling to access GP services and appointments.

We have heard about a range of issues including;

- Frustrations with long phone queues
  - "I and others have tried ringing and been told you are 31 on the list -just after opening! Sometimes you move up the queue slowly and are then cut off."
  - "Spent two and a half hours on the phone waiting for my call to be answered without luck."
  - "Whenever I try to phone I get terminated then if you ever get through you are told at 8.50 in the morning there are no appointments."
- Difficult to use digital systems that were not working as expected
  - "Used Engage Consult as can be difficult getting through on the phone. No response. Tried surgery again, they have nothing to with the Engage Consult system and was recommended to try 111."
  - "The website offers the option to book an appointment online. When you click on the link it takes you to Patient Access website. When you have set up the app, it says your Doctors surgery does not support online appointment bookings."

Simultaneously, we are also hearing from NHS services and commissioners about changes being implemented that should improve people's experience of accessing GP services in a timely and convenient way.

In 2023, NHS England released their [delivery plan](#) for improving access to primary care, which included a commitment to implement a Modern General Practice (MGP) model, with the following objective:

*“Modern general practice is the foundation of a transformation journey to better align capacity with need, improve patient experience and improve the working environment for general practice staff” – NHS England, 2024*

One of the five key goals of the MGP model is to optimise contact channels for patients contacting GP practices. The MGP model defines this goal as:

*“Offering patient choice of access channel (telephone, online and in person) via highly usable and accessible practice websites, online consultation tools and improved telephone systems.” – NHS England, 2024*

In response to feedback from patients and the roll out of MGP, HWES undertook a mystery shopping project in late 2024 to identify and record the routes available to patients for accessing their GP practice in East Sussex.

The changing landscape of general practice is demonstrated by the publication of [NHS England’s latest guidance for the development of GP websites](#) which was released shortly after our mystery shop took place. It is positive to see that our findings and recommendations are mirrored within this guidance. When sharing this report with commissioners and practices we will also be signposting to this document as further guidance on improving the public and patient experience.

## 1.2 Aims and Objectives

Our aim was to review the access channels available to patients at GP practices in East Sussex via three key objectives:

1. Understand what routes are available to patients across East Sussex to access their GP services and appointments.
2. To develop an understanding of the difference in the provision and roll out of Modern General Practice across East Sussex.
3. To raise awareness amongst services and commissioners of our findings and where further implementation or development is needed.

## 1.3 Limitations

We acknowledge the limitations of our findings due to the subjective nature of the mystery shop methodology.

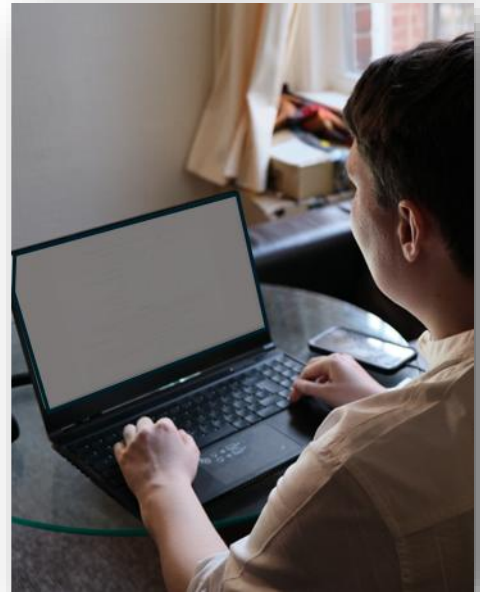
Whilst using a standardised methodology and having briefed our mystery shoppers, the process may incorporate aspects of personal interpretation.

# 2. Methodology

## 2.1 What did we do

Seven Healthwatch staff and 11 Volunteers undertook a Mystery Shopping exercise to identify the access channels currently available to patients at East Sussex GPs.

The Mystery Shop reviewed whether the channels identified for implementation by the MGP were in place, accessible and effective.



The Mystery Shoppers used a list of prescribed questions to review the website and 'in-hours' phone messages of practices, with the focus of exploring the three access channels set out by MGP:

- 1. Telephone:** were practice phone messages in place and clear, accessible and able to guide patients through the process?
- 2. Online:** were practice websites well designed, and is clear information given on accessing help and wider signposting? Are online contact methods (e-consult, digital forms) available?
- 3. In Person:** is it clear from the website and telephone messaging what is available face-to-face and are there any further details provided?

55 GP practices across East Sussex were included in the Mystery Shop carried out in December 2024. A full list of the reviewed practices is in Appendix 1.

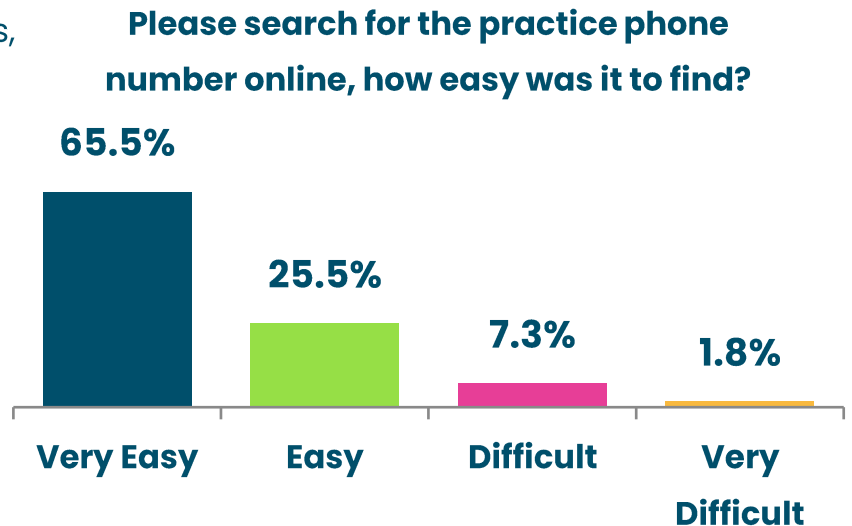
We recognise the ongoing pressures on GP practices to respond to high demand for services, update frequently changing information, and communicate regularly with local people. Our review is focused on positively supporting commissioners and practices to understand lay experiences of the information they are presenting via their websites and phone messaging. Any issues or concerns identified are accompanied by recommendations on how these could be overcome, improved, or changed for the better.

# 3. Key findings and themes

1. There is disparity in the way MGP is being implemented by practices across East Sussex as evidenced by the current content of their websites and phone messages.
2. Only 61.8% of GP Practice phone messages reviewed made it clear what access channels are available to the patient.
3. A good practice website does not automatically mean a good phone system or message.
4. Only 12.7% of the phone messages reviewed mentioned walk-in access at GP surgeries and our reviewers only found information on 32.7% of the practice websites relating to walk-in access.
5. For most practices finding the correct website and telephone numbers online was either very easy or easy.
6. 41.8% of practice phone messages provided information on what to do in an emergency.
7. The ring back option was only observed on phone systems at 34.5% of practices.

# 4. Our Findings: Phone Messaging

To start the mystery shop process, and to replicate the process a patient may go through when contacting their practice, we asked our reviewers to begin by finding their allocated surgeries phone number online via a web search.



For 90.9% of practices, respondents found it very easy or easy to find the practices phone number online. For most practices, the number was found on the website home page, or after one click on a 'contact' us button.

*"I searched [practice name] into my browser and it was at the top of the list with the contact number clearly highlighted."*

In the instance where reviewers found the numbers difficult or very difficult to find, it was usually when multiple practices shared a website. For example, one practice shared a website with three other surgeries as part of a primary care network. Consequently, the presence of multiple telephone numbers on one website made it more difficult to identify the correct one for the practice the reviewers were looking for.

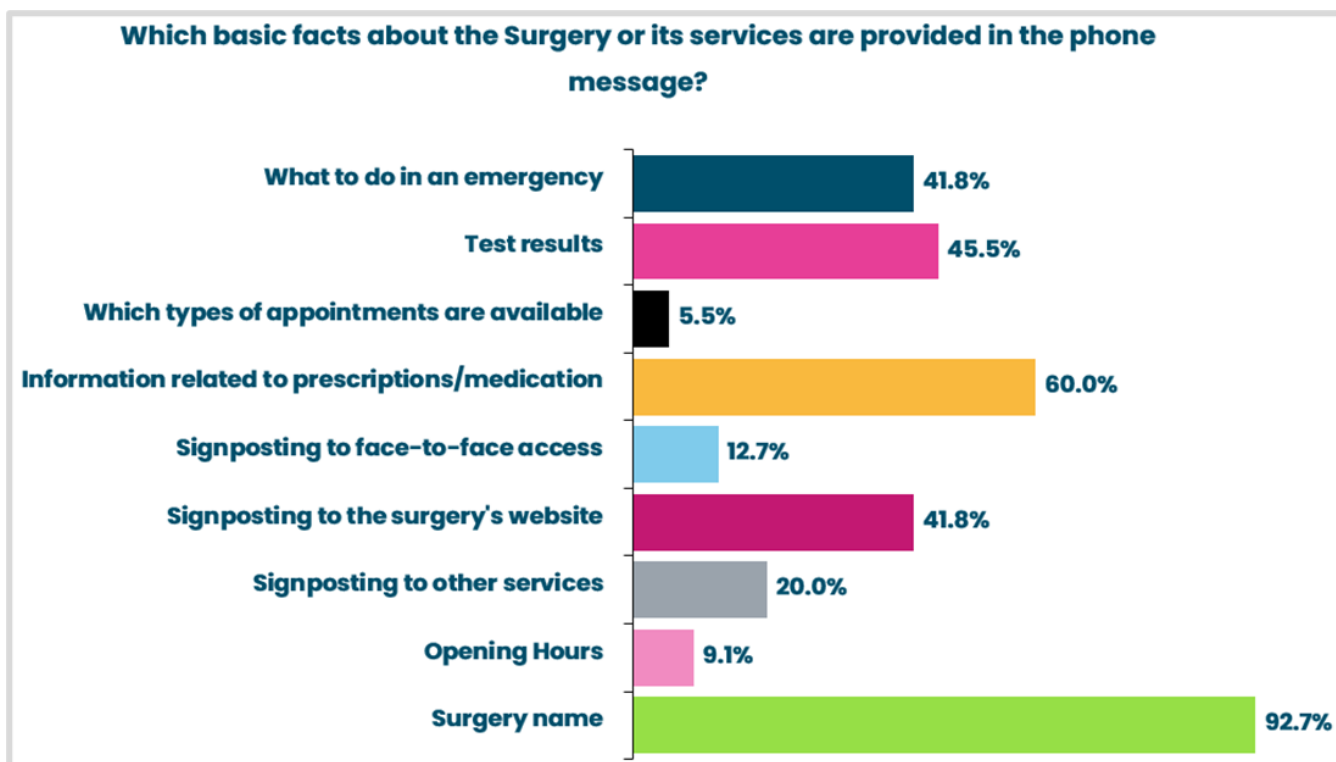
*"The surgery is part of a partnership with 4 surgeries sharing one website, so it was difficult to find the number required."*

Once the phone numbers had been found our reviewers were asked to ring the practice anytime during the practice opening hours, and note down their experience, capturing information on the content as well as the clarity of the message (volume, speed etc).



For almost all the practices reviewed (98.2%), the message began after five or fewer rings and the majority started with a pre-recorded message (81.8%). The rest went directly to an option menu. Within the initial message or options menu of the practice reviewed, 92.7% included the surgery name. However, some practices did not, making it difficult for reviewers to confirm which they had contacted.

Of the facts we asked our reviewers to identify, information relating to the types of appointments available (5.5%) and the opening hours of the practice (9.1%) featured the least in phone messages. Information related to medication and prescriptions featured in more than half of the messages, and just under half (41.8%) of the practices included information about what to do in an emergency. Only 41.8% of phone messages also included details about the practice's website.



Our reviewers also recorded which, if any, alternative services were referenced in the message. 999 was identified most as an alternative for help, with 41.8% of the messages referring to the service. More than a third of the messages (38.3%) did not identify any other service to callers.

Of the two-thirds of practices with messages where other healthcare services were identified, only 21.8% provided clear and comprehensive information about the circumstances in which they should be contacted, 23.6% of the practices provided some limited information and 27.3% did not provide this information.

*"The pre-recorded message is clear about the circumstances you should dial 999 but does not specify what 111 should be used for Out of Hours."*

After listening to the initial pre-recorded message or options menu, at 72.7% of the practices our reviewers were placed into a queue, and the majority of these were made aware of their place in the queue. However, only in 34.5% of the messages were our reviewers made aware of an option to request a call back to avoid waiting.

We also asked our reviewers to rate the overall message quality in terms of volume, sound quality, tone and clarity, speed and the usefulness of the information.

- The majority (96.4%) rated the **volume** of the message either a 4 or 5
- The majority (98.1%) rated the **sound quality** of the message either a 4 or 5
- The majority (82.3%) rated the **tone and clarity of the voice** as either a 4 or 5
- The majority (76.4%) rated the **speed of message delivery** as either a 4 or 5
- **Usefulness of information** was lowest rated with more than half (58.2%) of the messages being rated a 3 or below.

“Overall, a very comprehensive message, included mentioning the surgery would answer the call ‘as soon as possible’ and that all calls were ‘important to them’. Informed callers what type of appointments were available and how they could be made i.e. on the website or via telephone.”

“Volume of pre-recorded message is fine – however, the hold music is very loud, even at phone minimum volume”

“The option menu was unclear and difficult to follow as a number of practices were listed. The message started by introducing the partnership not the practice, which was quite confusing.”

For the final part of the mystery shop we asked our reviewers how clear specific elements relating to the Modern General Practice model were having listened to the message.

Our reviews found that just over a third (34.5%) of all the messages reviewed provided clarity on which access channels are available at the practice. However, only 27.3% of the messages made it clear when different channels were available and only 18.2% of the messages provided information on how the various access channels differ from each other.

# 5. Our Findings: Websites

As with the phone messaging, to start our website mystery shops we provided our reviewers with the name of a practice and asked them to find its website online. For 92.7% of practices our reviewers found the website very easy to locate as they often came up as one of the first search results across an array of search engines.

For the other 7.3% who found the practice difficult to find, as with the phone numbers, a reoccurring issue was faced when multiple practices shared a single website.

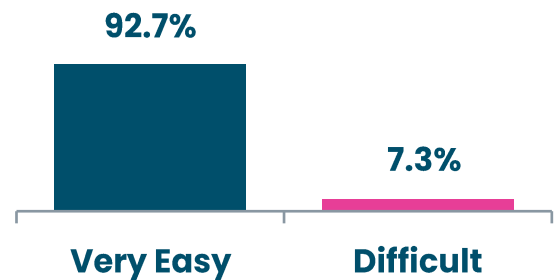
Once they found the practice's website, our reviewers examined which contact details were provided. On most, postal addresses and phone numbers were easiest to locate, but there was more variation in how easy our mystery shoppers found it to find an email address, with reviewers unable to find them on 32.7% of the websites.

We also asked our reviewers to record what access methods were presented on the website as a means of contacting the practice.

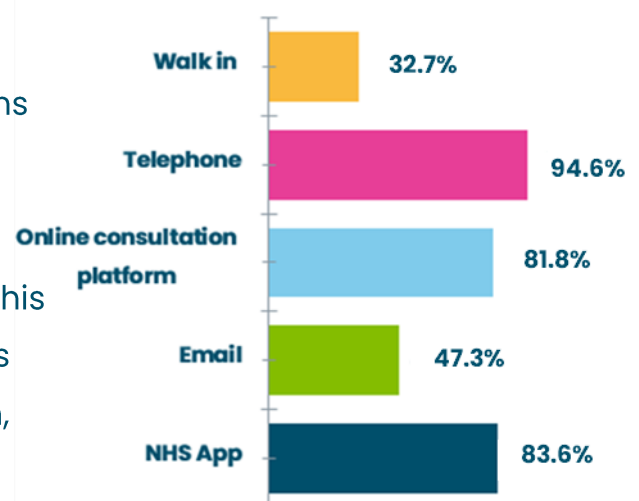
Information about telephone access (94.6%), the NHS App (83.6%) and online consultation platforms (81.9%) were identified on most websites.

Information about walk-in access was less common, with reviewers only finding mention of this on 32.7% of the websites. Of the practice websites where walk-in was identified as an access option, this was often highlighted via patient information areas or as an option for booking an appointment.

**Please search for the practice online, how easy was it to find the practice website?**



**Which of the following are identified as access channels?**

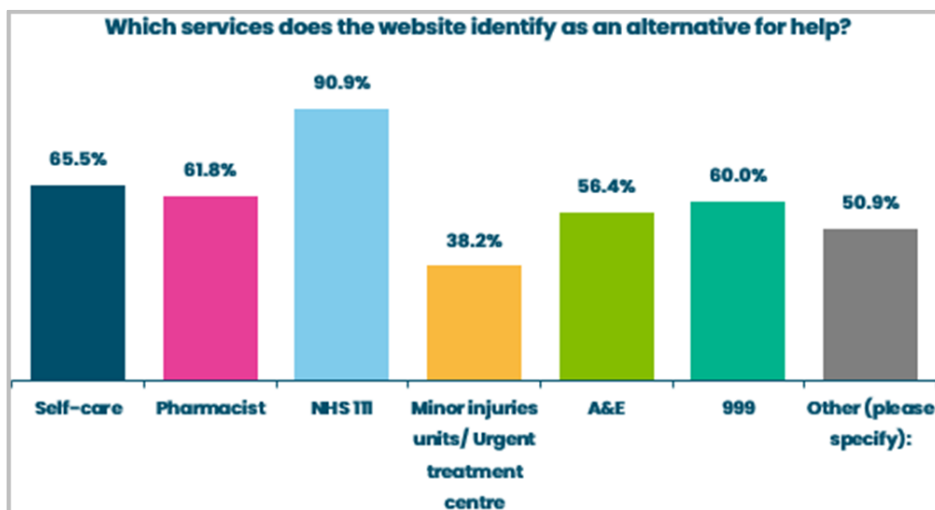


*"To make an appointment with a member of our clinical team, if you have internet access please use our new online patient triage system, otherwise call reception on ... or come in a see us at our reception desk at the practice."*

For most access channels, information was provided to explain what each could be used for and what the next steps would be following contact with the practice. However, less information was provided about when and how to use the different access channels.

As well as exploring access channels, our reviewers also looked at what patients were able to do via the website. On most websites, it was clear that you were able to request a prescription, make an appointment, re-arrange/cancel an appointment and submit an admin request. Our reviewers found it less clear to find whether you were able to self-refer to other services (e.g. physiotherapy) via the website, with this option only being located at just over half (54.7%) of practices.

We asked our reviewers to explore if any other health and care services were offered as alternative services. We found that 90.9% of practices identified NHS 111. The services least identified were Minor Injuries Units or Urgent Treatment Centres (38.2%).



Additionally, 70.9% of the websites provided some information about the circumstances in which you should contact these services for help.

56.4% of the websites also provided information about community or voluntary services, although some of our reviewers found this could be difficult to find and often required a lot of click throughs and some prior knowledge of what you were looking for.

“The website has some good information however it cannot easily be found in some instances.”

“Although it was quite difficult to find, and you had to click through a lot of pages, you could find information that was clear and comprehensive.”

Only 7.3% of websites included information about Healthwatch East Sussex.

As per the phone messaging, for the final part of the mystery shop review we asked our reviewers how clear specific elements relating to Modern General Practice were having reviewed the website.

For 92.7% of the websites, our reviewers felt it was clear which access channels are available at practices; for 61.8% it was clear how each of the access channels offered differed, and for 52.7% of practices it was clear when the different access channels are available.

"Very overwhelming front page - an overload of information. But that information is clear and helpful when you do click on it."

"Some things are difficult to find and as ever, you must take time to find the information and work your way through the information boxes on the Home Page. Many people won't bother if they can't find what they are looking for first time. I could not find a search facility so that you could type in what you were looking for."

# Conclusions

Overall, the findings from our mystery shop suggests there is a disparity in the way elements of MGP are being implemented across GP practices in East Sussex. We found there are some excellent examples of websites and phone messages that provide clarity on the different ways that patients and the public are able to access services.

It was positive to find that for most practices finding the correct website and telephone numbers online was either very easy or easy. Using various search engines, most reviewers found their practice was present at the top of search results suggesting a good level of search engine optimisation is being implemented by the services.

As mentioned, the practices which proved more difficult to find online were those sharing a website with other practices. Although we acknowledge the benefits of this approach for practices in terms of cost and helping to simplify the update process, for patients and the public it could lead to confusion when looking for a specific practice, particularly for new patients or those who are unaware that their practice is part of a group or Primary Care Network.

Where practices are sharing a website, it is important that steps are taken to ensure this is as clear as possible for patients. This could include making sure all practice names and contact details are featured clearly and prominently on the home page of the website, as well as any explanation of the network or group.

Throughout our mystery shop it was clear that of the three access channels that MGP states should be available to patients, walk-in access was the most challenging to find information about. as it was only available on one-in-three websites and in one-in-six phone messages. Of the practice websites where walk-in was identified as an access option, this was often highlighted via patient information areas or as an option for booking an appointment. This suggests a need for more information to be provided to patients on whether this is an available option for them and what it can be used for.



We have also identified a need for further improvements to be made to the phone queue process. Only 34.5% of those reviewed identified an option to request a call back, a feature that NHS England flag as helping to improve patient experiences and reduce the burden on practice teams. A key element of the MGP transformation also includes *“making full use of a multi-professional primary care team, community services and ‘self access’ options where appropriate”*.

Our reviewers found most of the practice websites included signposting to alternative healthcare services, but there were variances in which services were mentioned, how much information was available, and how easy it was to find. Most of the websites identified at least one or more alternative health and care service that patients could go to for help. There were variations in the accessibility of this information, as our reviewers found the websites adopted different approaches to the location of, and way in which information was displayed. For some, finding this information required multiple clicks, and navigation through the website or existing knowledge of what to search for using the websites search function.

In general, it was clear to our reviewers what you were able to do in terms of accessing GP services, based on the content of practice websites. For more than three quarters of the sites, it was clear that you could request a prescription, make an appointment, re-arrange/cancel an appointment and submit an admin request.

With the practices phone messaging, reviewers found limited signposting information, with one-in-three messages not including any at all, and less than half mentioning the practice’s website. So effective websites with clear information on health and care options were not always supported by clear phone messages. If the first interaction is with the phone messaging, people could be unaware this information is available elsewhere as an alternative to waiting in the phone queue.

Given the emphasis on getting patients to the most appropriate service in the most efficient way, some practices may benefit from making information on alternative services clearer and easier to access and also ensure there is mention of information on their websites in their phone messages.

# Recommendations

## Healthwatch East Sussex

1. To share this report with GP practices and NHS commissioners to raise awareness of where further implementation or development of MGP is required, alongside national guidance on how improvements can be made.
2. To engage with local GP practices to raise awareness of Healthwatch East Sussex and the ways in which we can help them to develop and promote their services.
3. To share feedback on communication channels at GP practice with practice staff and NHS commissioners to help inform awareness of good practice and areas for improvement.

## GP Practices

4. To regularly conduct lay reviews of phone messages and websites to understand patient and public experiences, and whether these meet users needs.
5. To review the wording and format of menu options on websites to help patients navigate sites and find information quickly and efficiently.
6. To adapt/ensure cloud-based telephony provides callers with the option of a call back service, to avoid long wait times in a phone queue.
7. To make it very clear on practice website if patients can walk-in to the practice to access services i.e. book appointments.
8. To include additional and more detailed information about community and voluntary services that can be accessed locally for support.
9. Greater clarity is needed on alternative pathways within practice phone messaging, particularly on urgent and emergency care options.

## NHS Sussex

10. To encourage more uniform messaging, so system-wide communications related to which services to use and when, are mirrored across GP websites and phone messaging.
11. To regularly share NHS England guidance, such as latest guidance for the development of GP websites, with practices on creating highly usable and accessible practice websites, online consultation tools and improved telephone systems, and offer support for implementing this.
12. Support sharing of local best practice examples for the development and operation of websites and telephony between practices.
13. To identify opportunities to support practices with website procurement and management.



# Response from NHS Sussex

NHS Sussex provided a response to our reports and its findings:

*We thank Healthwatch for their recommendations and report which provides valuable insight into the experiences of patients in East Sussex when accessing General Practice services.*

*Extensive work has taken place across Sussex to further improve access to GP practices and the support they provide to our population, for example the implementation of a 'Modern General Practices' which includes enhancing digital options for patients to access their practice team, while maintaining and improving other methods of access.*

*However, transformation is an ongoing process, and we are committed to supporting practices to continue to address areas of improvement.*

*Our next steps are to work together with Healthwatch to take forward the recommendations and this will inform our work in 2025–26, and will also help to shape the next phase of our general practice campaign in the spring.*

March 2025

# Appendix 1

## Surgeries included in the Mystery Shop

**Sidley Medical Practice**

**Harbour Medical Practice**

**Princes Park Health Centre**

**Stone Cross Surgery**

**Foundry Healthcare Lewes**

**Bird in Eye Surgery**

**Buxted Medical Centre**

**Heathfield and Firs Surgeries**

**Herstmonceux Integrative Health Centre**

**Meads Medical Centre**

**Mid Downs Medical Centre**

**Bridgeside Surgery**

**Hailsham Medical Group**

**Quintin Medical Centre**

**Beaconsfield Road Surgery**

**Carisbrooke Surgery**

**Churchwood Medical Centre**

**Harold Road Surgery**

**Hastings Old Town Surgery**

**High Glades Medical Centre**

**Priory Road Surgery**

**Sedlescombe House Surgery**

**South Saxon House Surgery**

**Station Practice**

**Warrior Square Surgery**

**Ashdown Forest Health Centre**

**Beacon Surgery**

**Groombridge and Hartfield Medical Group**

**Rotherfield Surgery and The Brook Health Centre**

**Saxonbury House Medical Practice**

**Wadhurst Medical Group**

**Woodhill Surgery**

**Fairfield Surgery**

**Ferry Road Health Centre**

**Martins Oak Surgery**

**Northiam and Broad Oak Surgeries**

**Oldwood Surgery**

**Rye Medical Centre**

**Sedlescombe and Westfield Surgeries**

**Old School Surgery**

**Seaford Medical Practice**

**Chapel Street Surgery**

**Havens Health**

**Quayside Medical Practice**

**Rowe Avenue Surgery**

**Downlands Medical Practice**

**Manor Park Surgery**

**Victoria Medical Centre**



**healthwatch**  
East Sussex

Healthwatch East Sussex  
The Old Printworks  
Commercial Road  
Eastbourne  
East Sussex  
BN21 3XQ

[www.healthwatcheastsussex.co.uk](http://www.healthwatcheastsussex.co.uk)  
t: 0333 101 4007  
e: [enquiries@healthwatcheastsussex.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@healthwatcheastsussex.co.uk)  
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