

# GP practice websites in York: audit findings

February 2025



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## Acknowledgements

We thank our amazing Healthwatch York volunteer team for their research for this report. Fifteen volunteers spent more than 60 hours looking at the 11 GP practice websites that cover York. They responded using a survey to provide feedback about information available on the sites and the look and ease of use of the sites.

In total 41 audits were carried out between mid-November 2024 and 31 January 2025.

We also thank Healthwatch North Yorkshire who ran a similar project in November 2023<sup>1</sup> and shared their questions and feedback which informed our project.

Cover image from Julia Zyablova via unsplash

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.healthwatchnorthyorkshire.co.uk/report/2023-11-27/gp-website-health-check>

# Executive Summary

Websites are an increasingly important place for people to find out information and access services from local GP practices. The annual GP Patient Survey found that nationally, 61% of respondents had visited their GP website in 2023<sup>2</sup>.

In addition, our earlier report, Exploring Access to GP Services in York<sup>3</sup>, included feedback from people about their experiences of local GP practices, including comments about practice websites. The work explores that further to explore how York's GP practice websites are and are not helping people effectively access healthcare in the city.

This report looks at the 11 GP practice websites which cover York and the surrounding areas. We wanted to understand how useful GP websites are to find out information about practices and the services they offer. While the websites are all different, we have found some common positives and areas for improvement for the sites.

## Positives

- The best websites had the most commonly searched for information on the homepage.
- Some websites have very clear information and are easy to navigate.
- Good information on the homepages. Clear and easy to follow.
- Where there were search functions, they were very helpful.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://gp-patient.co.uk/practices-search>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.healthwatchyork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/GP-Report-Final-September-2024.pdf>

- Where there was information about staff roles or staff themselves, this was helpful.
- All the websites had information about appointments on the homepage.
- It was most useful if the online forms, including those to report symptoms or book appointments, were available all the time and not just during practice hours.

Areas for improvement are included in the recommendations on page 15. Many are the opposite of the positives and include:

- Information should be up to date and links checked to ensure they are working.
- Improve colour contrast to ensure text is clear for all users.
- There should be multiple ways for contacting the practice so that people without IT access or those who can't use the phone can still easily get in touch.
- Remove visual clutter so it is easy for people to find information and particularly popular or important information.
- Include guidance on how to use forms for people who are not familiar with them.
- Provide accessibility options on the website.
- Provide information about staff roles (and staff as appropriate).
- Test your website, or any updates, with your patients.

## Background

### Local context

Feedback we received through our 2024 GP survey included a number of comments about GP websites. These included reflections and suggestions:

- "Different methods of contact, app, website, and phone can be confusing to navigate and give varying results."

- “To be able to arrange appointments over the phone and a simplified website.”
- “They want everything done via the website, which is not available at weekends!”
- “Website/portal – can only access between certain hours so if you’re working and unable to get access to internet then you cannot use this.”
- “The other problem I have is that the surgery no longer activates their patients' website to request my repeat prescription. This is now done via an NHS app which I am unable to do. I tried but I have eye problems. ... So, I now have to do paper requests and go to the surgery several times every two months ...”
- “Also website for trying to get in touch is very confusing (I am computer literate so even worse for those who struggle).”
- “The website is convoluted and dated. There is too much to go through to get what you need.”
- “Unable to get through on phone and using their website is a nightmare as it assumes you are tech savvy. It needs to be clear using easy to understand language. An Easy Read version would be helpful.”
- “Website works when it wants.”
- “Excellent website.”
- “I have a brain injury. I can't navigate the website.”

### **National context**

NHS England have recently published a step-by-step guide to improving general practice website online journeys<sup>4</sup>. The guidance aims to help practices:

- understand the elements of an improvement plan and the information to collect

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/step-by-step-guide-to-improving-general-practice-website-online-journeys/>

- benchmark the usability of current online patient journeys
- make a plan for improvement
- deliver and maintain that improvement

This was published after our volunteers completed their audits. We believe this is timely, as we are confident that our service user feedback forms part of the information to collect and will help York's GP practices make sure their websites are user friendly and work effectively for as wide a group of people as possible.

# What we did to find out more

In partnership with our volunteers we adapted the Healthwatch North Yorkshire survey to develop something appropriate for York's 11 GP practices. The survey was circulated to volunteers, supported by a guidance document. Volunteers were given a list of the GP practices in York and asked to use the survey questions to audit as many websites as they were able to between November 2024 and January 2025.

At least three volunteers looked at each website and one volunteer looked at all the websites.

The GP websites audited were:

- Dalton Terrace
- Elvington Medical Practice
- Front Street
- Haxby Group
- Jorvik Gillygate
- MyHealth
- Old School Medical Practice
- Pocklington Group Practice
- Priory Medical Group
- Unity Health
- York Medical Group

Volunteers used a variety of devices including computers, tablets and smart phones. The majority of volunteers used a computer. We also asked how confident volunteers were in using computers with 1 being not at all confident and 10 very confident. Most volunteers scored themselves between 6 and 10, with the majority scoring 8 or above.

# Findings

## Ease of finding the website

All but five of the respondents found it easy to find the GP practice website via an online search. In most instances the website for the practice came up immediately and was top of the search. The practice that was particularly difficult was Unity as there is more than one practice with this name in England.

## First impressions

We asked our volunteers to note their first impressions on opening the website they were auditing. Comments included:

- “It is clear and has page options for common questions but clicking on these options does take you away from the homepage but there is a 'Home' button on a bar near the top.” “Clear, but very cluttered.”
- “There is a lot of information on the homepage, with lots of buttons with writing and pictures. But while it could be overwhelming, it was reasonably clear when you start to look to see if the information you want is there.”
- “Clear layout with image boxes and large text links, plus additional links at the top. Perhaps a little bit too minimalist.”
- “It looks professional, with NHS logo the first thing you spot and designed in typical blue and white colours.”
- “Fairly easy to use but you have to look for information.”
- “Has a more local/friendly feel. But doesn't have links to all the most useful information on the homepage.”
- “I like it. The homepage is clear and presented well. Information is broken up nicely, with images, clear headings, and different colours. I also really like the fact it presents you with “Welcome to...” . It feels like a website for patients.”
- “Clear ‘subjects’ to click on. Excellent.”

- “Very easy to navigate and search facility seemed to be good, finding most things I was looking for and very few dead ends!”
- “Very impressive and business like!”
- “It was clear, had sensible sections easily accessed and provided useful information on the front page. I also liked the option to read the page in different languages (105 different languages available).”
- “Very good. Helpful links, informative text without being too much, images and graphics are clean and easy to understand, not too much on the homepage.”
- “There is some very key information which is in pale blue, which I missed entirely at the start of this review – suggest this needs re-doing in a more prominent colour.”
- “The information is easy to see, however, it is very colourful and the background moves making it a little overwhelming.”
- “Very neat, easy to follow, not cluttered.”

### **Searching the website**

We asked our volunteers if the websites had a search function and then how easy it was to use.

Of the 11 GP practice websites they looked at, only one did not have a search function. Volunteers found the search function difficult to find on one and suggested it should be more prominent on the homepage. For the remaining nine practice websites, there was a search function and it was easy to locate.

In terms of using the search function, we asked how easy it was to search and find relevant information. In most instances, volunteers found it easy to use and find appropriate information. However, some commented that the search function only found some information and a few that it didn't

find the information being searched for at all even though it was on the website.

Comments included:

- “You don't really need this because of the easy access that you can get to key information from the homepage.”
- “Managed to find information on most topics searched for.”
- “I searched 'register' and 'prescriptions' where both came up as top results.”
- “I tried searching 'appointments' and it came up with relevant and useful results very quickly.”
- “I put in the search box making appointments and was taken to a page about annual health checks for those with learning disabilities.”
- “On further searching during process, found that sometimes the search identified irrelevant information or no further information e.g. diabetes.”
- “I put diabetes into search engine. This took me to separate diabetes advice page but there was no further information about diabetes! (They could easily resolve this by creating a link to Diabetes UK or NHS website for diabetes). On further investigation I came across diabetes information under Long Term Conditions – Health Advice. The two webpages need linking.”
- “I typed in simple things such as "how to make a complaint" and "prescriptions" and direct information came up. When I typed in other things such as "online medical records" or "NHS App", it didn't come up with any relevant information.”

### **Information on the homepage**

We asked our volunteers to look at some of the most common information people might be looking for on the homepage. We have listed below what we asked them to

look for and whether it appeared on the homepages of the 11 York GP practice websites.

- Different surgeries – if the practice has more than one:
  - Of those practices that have more than one surgery, six practices had information on the homepage and had the information elsewhere on the website.
- Opening times
  - Some of the smaller practices did have the opening times on their homepage. Where practices had more than one surgery, the information was elsewhere on the website, often on the contact us page, but not usually on the homepage.
- Registering as a new patient
  - Generally there was information on the homepage or, most often, a tab or button on the homepage that takes someone to information about how to register. However, on some websites it was difficult to find the information.
- Making, changing or cancelling an appointment
  - There was often either information or a link/button on the homepage to find out more information about appointments.
- Getting test results
  - Mostly this information was via a link or button on the homepage of each website. Some volunteers commented that this information could be difficult to find.

- Getting a repeat prescription
  - All websites had information about getting a repeat prescription. This was mostly via a link on the homepage or information elsewhere on the website.
  
- Getting a sick note
  - Information about getting a sick note was sometimes more difficult to find, but every practice had information somewhere on its website. Sometimes this was on the homepage, but mostly it was elsewhere on the website and needed the volunteer to search for it.
  
- Local pharmacy
  - It was less common to find information about the local pharmacy(ies) on GP websites and rare to find information on any practice homepage. Of the 11 practice websites, six had information about one or more local pharmacies on their site, for three websites some volunteers found some limited information and for two websites there was not any information.
  
- Vaccinations
  - Due to the time of year that the audits took place, some websites had information about Covid and flu vaccinations on their homepage including details of how to arrange them. Other sites had some

information on other pages but volunteers had to search for it. Some websites did not have any information or information only about travel vaccinations.

### **Contact details**

As well as asking about contact details being available on the GP website's homepage, we also asked volunteers to see if the contact details provided at least two ways of getting in touch. That means a phone number, but also an email, or other means of contact for people who can't use the phone.

There was a mixed response about the number of methods to contact the GP practice. Many had a phone number and a physical address, supplemented by a form to complete to submit symptoms. There was only one practice that offered an email address as a means of contact.

### **Appointments**

We asked if information about appointments was easy to follow, whether there was a range of options for how to book an appointment, if there was information about the process of getting an appointment and the time it might take as well as the types of appointment available (phone, face to face or virtual). We also asked volunteers to see if there was information about home visits and how to arrange them, if the websites explained how to cancel or change an appointment and whether there was information about what to do out of hours.

All the volunteers said the information about booking urgent and routine appointments was either very or quite easy to follow. Comments included:

- “How to make all appointments was clear from the homepage that directs you to appointments, and then breaks down the details easily, giving clear instructions for all options. It directs you to call the surgery for urgent appointments and says ‘reception staff will do their best to fit you in.’”
- “Detailed page on urgent and routine appointments with the option of booking online (via link that takes you to Patient Access) or an automated 24hr phone number for booking.”
- “On the appointments page, it differentiates between urgent and routine appointments and what to do quite clearly.”
- “Very limited information. No differentiation between routine and urgent appointments. The information is straightforward in terms of what it says, but not particularly helpful. It just says ring up or use the online form!”
- “The ‘Appointments’ page has plenty of detail on appointments but not same-day. Urgent appointments are ‘managed within one working day’ but it doesn’t specify whether this means someone can get a same-day appointment.”
- “Information about an urgent appointment says to phone with no alternative if someone can’t use the phone. Information about a routine appointment gives the options of using the NHS app (no other online option) phone or going to the practice.”

All volunteers said there is a range of options for how to book an appointment with options including phone, online (including the practice's form or the NHS app) and going into a surgery. However, not all practices offer all three options. One doesn't mention an online option and another doesn't include information about going to the surgery.

About two thirds of our volunteers either didn't find any information about the time it would take to get an appointment or found that the information was not clear.

Just under half of our volunteers said they found information about the types of appointment people could have, e.g. phone, face-to-face etc. Some included information about the healthcare professional that a patient might see. The remaining volunteers could not find this information on the websites.

All the websites had information about home visits and how to request one if appropriate.

Volunteers found clear information about how to cancel or change an appointment on all but two of the practice websites. On the remaining two, they either could not find any information or found it very difficult to find.

Every practice website had information about who to contact out of hours. This included NHS 111 and other options. Some websites mentioned phoning 999 in an emergency, some suggested going to the pharmacy and one mentioned the Urgent Treatment Centre.

## **Online forms, online services and the NHS app**

Our volunteers tried to find information about different forms available.

Seven of 11 GP practice websites had a form available to report symptoms/request an appointment related to symptoms. Of those, two were only available at some times of the day, generally when the GP practice was open. However, not all volunteers could find the forms or information was not clear enough for them to identify what they were looking for. Four of the websites had clear information about how to use these forms. For the others, either our volunteers couldn't find information or there wasn't any. Our earlier report, Exploring Access to GP Services in York<sup>5</sup>, included feedback from people who struggled to use the online forms or found them difficult to use. So, it was disappointing that guidance on using the forms wasn't available on all websites.

All but one practice had an online form to enable people to provide feedback, including compliments and complaints. These forms were available at all times. Some practices also linked to Family and Friends feedback and one to Care Opinion. The one practice that didn't provide an online form, did provide information about how to provide feedback by phone or letter.

We asked volunteers to note if there was a link to the GP practice's own online system. This wasn't always clear to our volunteers with a number of people reviewing the same website recording different answers. Six of the websites had a clear link,

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.healthwatchyork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/GP-Report-Final-September-2024.pdf>

for three websites volunteers couldn't find a mention of the GP's own online services and for three websites volunteers said they didn't know/could not find a link or reference.

We also wanted to know if the GP websites promoted the NHS app and they all did. Some of the practices use this rather than their own online systems for a range of services, others offer both options. Some GP websites had more information and guidance about how to use the NHS app, others had links to information on the NHS England website.

### **Accessibility**

We asked volunteers to look at accessibility features on the website itself as well as looking for information about access when visiting GP surgeries.

In terms of website accessibility, we were particularly looking for making text larger, speaking the content and translating into other languages. Some of our volunteers again struggled to find the information when it was there. A number found an accessibility statement but nothing to help people use the website in different languages or formats. In total, volunteers found that five websites had these kind of accessibility features, two via Google translate. Five did not have any features and one had some information, including information in Easy Read, but nothing about how to change text into other languages or formats.

Regarding physical accessibility of surgeries, volunteers found some of the information difficult to find and it wasn't clear where

to look. Five websites had very good information about a range of things including accessible parking, the accessibility of the surgery and consulting rooms, hearing loops and more; four websites had more limited information about accessible parking or wheelchair access only and two websites had no information at all.

Volunteers commented:

- “Website has a facilities and accessibility page for patients in need of information regarding disabled access and hearing difficulties. At the top of the website there is a language button to change language. They also have an accessibility link at the bottom of the page with information and who to contact if they can't access the website. Also includes information on widgets that will help make text larger or text-to-speech.”
- “On the appointments page it mentions to let the surgery know if you require an interpreter or if you need any help with your appointment. It was not clear/I could not find any info on accessible parking/accessibility.”
- “There is an Easy Read guide to making an appointment, dealing with prescriptions and getting a vaccination, but nothing about making the text larger or speaking the content.”
- “Yes there are accessibility features - found under the policies section, not that easy to find.”
- “Button on homepage that says ‘Language’ takes you to a statement ‘Translate with Google’ (not very helpful).”

- “Contact us page says that they can provide Braille documents, accessible parking and toilet, signing service, step free and wheelchair access.”
- “Option to translate text into 105 different languages – really good and accessible. No information about making text larger.”
- “Braille translation service, accessible parking and toilet, induction loop, signing service, step-free access, text relay, wheelchair access, baby changing facility all listed.”

### **Staff and services**

We wanted to understand if practices include information about either the people who work there or the roles that people fulfil. All but one website had information about either the staff team or roles, but the level of detail provided differed significantly.

Comments included:

- “Shows names and qualifications of the doctors and information sections regarding other staff members.”
- “Dedicated page listing names of all staff and which role they play within the practice team.”
- “Gives working days and titles – doctors, nurses, healthcare assistant, phlebotomist, practice management administration and secretaries.”
- “There is a list of GP partners including photos and short sentences about their qualifications and interests. There is then a list of the salaried GPs.”
- “Some photographs of: managing partner; clinical partners (GPs); salaried GPs; advanced care practitioner; physician associate and lead nurse. No information about the practice manager or information on how to contact them.”

- “There is a list of GPs, practice nurses, healthcare assistant, practice manager and operations manager all listed by name. But no information about different roles etc.”
- “There is a page about the different roles within the practice, but it doesn't give information about who works at the practice or which roles are at each surgery etc.”

Volunteers also looked for information about social prescribers. Some websites included information as part of the staff team, others had information on a different part of the website, often only found by searching. Two websites didn't have any information about social prescribers.

We also asked whether websites included information about clinics and services the practice offers and whether there is any information about non-NHS services, including Healthwatch York.

All but one website had either some or a lot of information about clinics and services the practice offers. The best websites provide a lot of information including short introductions to the clinics/services, who runs them and how to get in touch and/or book an appointment.

All websites had some information about non-practice or non-NHS services, although this was easier to find on some websites than others. A number of sites link to the NHS Choices website for wider health information. Four websites contained information about Healthwatch England or Healthwatch York.

## **What could be better?**

We asked volunteers what they thought could be better with GP websites in general. Their comments included:

- “There were links that didn't work and much of the information felt out of date and not reliable.”
- “Although the website and homepage look impressive and welcoming when you click onto other pages, for example, appointments, there is a lot of writing /information on the page which is a bit overwhelming. I think some of the pages could be revised, so they are clear like the homepage, and basic points clear and highlighted.”
- “There were a couple of links that led to information that had been temporarily removed. Not sure if this was because they're not registering any more patients or are updating the information. It would have been useful to have information about and how to contact the practice manager.”
- “When opening a page, they always opened on top of the existing page and not in a new window, so it was difficult to go back to what I was looking at.”
- “Some information is difficult to find and involves clicking multiple links. I understand that this keeps the main webpages clean and simple, but there could be drop-down menus added to the top links to make it a bit easier to find certain details.”
- “Lots of scrolling to find information and not always where you would expect it.”

# Recommendations

These are general recommendations. We recognise that some of the websites already provide the suggestions below:

- Make sure information on practice websites is up to date and all the links work.
- Make sure that text and backgrounds have a good colour contrast, so it is easy for people to read. For example, dark text on light backgrounds or vice versa.
- Always provide two ways for people to get in touch, so there is an option for people who can't use a phone or for those who can't access IT.
- Keep the website as clear and simple to follow as possible. Use tabs or menus to provide easy to find information.
- Have the most important information for patients clearly on the homepage either as text, or more likely as a linked tab, box or in a menu. This should include frequently requested information including about opening times, contact details (including for multiple surgeries if appropriate), appointment information, ordering a repeat prescription, getting test results, registering as a new patient, sick notes etc.
- Where possible have seasonally appropriate information on the homepage like vaccination information.
- Provide a search function and thoroughly test it.
- If you have online forms, provide guidance on how to use forms for people who are not familiar with them.
- Provide accessibility options on the website which enables people to change the font size or colour, read the text out and to translate information into other languages.
- Provide information about physical accessibility at the surgery/surgeries. This should include information about how to arrange an interpreter.

- Provide information about staff roles (and staff as appropriate) that explains what that role does and why someone may have an appointment or be in contact with that person.
- Provide an email address for patients to get in touch about non-urgent issues, particularly those that do not require an appointment.
- Test your website, or any updates, with your patients or others and particularly with people who may not be familiar with the website or are not confident website users.
- Always make sure that there are options for people to use who don't use websites and that they do not have a poorer experience due to not having online access.



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