



Saffron Health Partnership

At the heart of the community

A Huge Thank You

We want to say a massive thank you to all our amazing patients for your wonderful support during the last 2 years.

Although we have remained open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we have had to adapt our ways of working to ensure we keep our staff and patients as safe as possible. We thank you for your understanding of these processes and your co-operation during these difficult times. We are offering 2,000 more appointments each month compared to pre-pandemic numbers. (Initially all were dealt with over the phone).

Thank you all for continuing to wear a face mask and thank you for understanding that the waiting rooms are less busy as we continue to offer a mix of face to face and telephone appointments.

We understand that some of you might have mixed emotions on how primary care has been operating in previous months, but we hope these can be put aside as we start to take steps towards being back to a 'new normal'.

As we look to move ahead and make some changes to how we see our patients, we would really value your continued support.

We hope that the changes outlined in this leaflet will continue to make your healthcare experience at SHP easier to navigate.

As a surgery, we have seen a 14% increase in the amount of nursing appointments, and a 23% increase in GP appointments between 2019/20 and 2021/22.

A note from our perspective

Demand for our service is at an all-time high. Our care navigators have seen a 240% increase in phone calls, compared to our pre-pandemic demand reflecting the increase in patient demand.

This is because we are now dealing with a much larger number of patient encounters than pre-pandemic:

1. Patients who would normally require our care on a day-to-day basis
2. Patients who required care during the pandemic but chose to delay seeking help, who are now coming forward and possibly requiring a higher level of care than beforehand.
3. Care for patients that NHS England told GPs to halt during the pandemic, such as coil changes and minor surgeries.
4. Patients require our support with symptoms of long COVID.
5. Patients who have previously been referred to secondary care, but due to the backlog in hospitals (as a result of the pandemic), we are now managing for longer.

(Secondary Care hospitals and GP practices are working extremely hard together to clear this backlog and to support patients who are waiting. We believe we will see a reduction in primary care demand once this backlog begins to reduce).

Although COVID-19 restrictions have now been ceased by the government, from a GP Practice perspective, the pandemic is far from over.



Experiencing the Pandemic in a GP Surgery

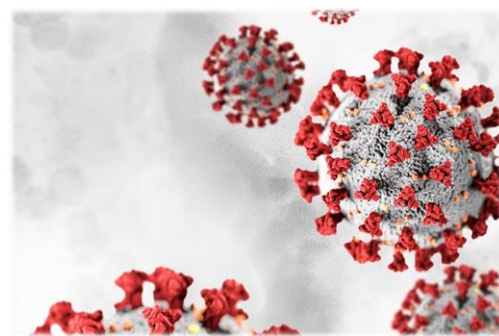
Our staff have worked incredibly hard throughout the pandemic and our telephone appointment lists have been on regular occasions running until midnight. Quite simply, as the Business Manager says, *“It has been a daily struggle to keep up team morale and retain our staff, especially in the face of negative public perception”*.

Looking back to March 2020, like many businesses we were forced to make drastic changes overnight. This change meant ‘normal’ surgery operation moved immediately to full telephone appointments. Our Surgery was originally supplied with no PPE, but thanks to local businesses, clinicians used makeshift PPE from boiler suits and welder masks to triage COVID positive patients in our car parks. All staff worked tirelessly to reduce A&E admission rates and to provide welfare calls to those most vulnerable to aid where needed. *This was all on top of our daily work from our usual patients.*

We are still experiencing an increase in paperwork, ranging from an increase in hospital letters, tasks from other health professionals and reviewing and actioning a record number of pathology results.

We are fortunate that prior to the pandemic we had invested resources into a web-based phone system, which could be deployed remotely. At the start of the pandemic, we introduced online consultations through the website, which allowed patients to request appointments online.

Our team are not immune to the impact of COVID-19, and like our patients, we have experienced sickness, isolation, and bereavement.



Ordering Medication.

Please continue to use the Practice website to order your medication online.

Please note that your medication requests are processed up to 7 days before they are due.

Did you know that every appointment a patient has with an outside organisation (e.g., hospital appointment) results in a letter updating us? This is then processed by our post team, updated in the patients record by our data coders and then actioned by a GP.



What we have learnt...

On a more positive note, we have learnt many lessons from the pandemic.

Although preferred by some of our patients, we have learnt that it is not always necessary for patients to see GP's face to face. In most cases, telephone consultations can be just as effective for staff to medically assess patients. Telephone appointments also allow us more time to treat more patients. Telephone appointments are convenient for those patients who do not have the time to come down to our surgery for their healthcare needs. Please be assured, that if a clinician thinks an examination is required, you will be asked to come and see one of the team.

We have conflicting patient feedback about the way our appointments system is working. Our surgery is now moving away from a 'total triage' system as we start to offer more services face to face for certain appointment types.

For appointments for acute medical problems, we continue to use the telephone appointment system as a first point of call to ensure we control for Covid and Monkeypox.

Prior to the pandemic patients were given a timed slot for appointments, but now we offer morning or afternoon slots, where patients are called for appointments in order of their clinical need. This ensures that patients who are most in need of our help are seen as soon as possible.

We know it is not always convenient for patients with a busy working life to find time to call at 8am.

We are working towards improving this process. We would like to remind patients that they can request a pre-bookable appointment through our website. This is regularly monitored by our care navigators and where appropriate they will try their best to book you an appointment as soon as possible. You can find this on our website at:

<https://www.saffronhealthpartnership.nhs.uk/>.

We promise that our care navigators are not 'gatekeeping' appointments - we just cannot physically cope with more than a handful of appointments being pre-booked ahead on each day, as the demand for appointments in this current time is too high and our surgery would simply not survive.

We understand some of your recent experiences at our surgery might not have been what you have wanted. We also know that the perceptions of General Practices in the media have been very negative (and not always truthful). **We want to emphasise that although are services are very stretched, if you need to see a doctor for a clinic emergency, we will try our very best to make sure you're spoke to on the day.**

We are aware of a small minority of patients that have been taking advantage of our appointment system and being dishonest to our care navigators about their health issues, to receive a fast-track appointment to a GP. We ask all patients to please tell the truth, so we can give you the best suited care for your needs and to be fair to your fellow patients.



Changes to our Practice:



Feedback and complaints:

Recently we have been seeing common themes in the feedback we are receiving from patients through our website, and we are wanting to address these publicly to help clarify some of the confusion:

Patients are upset they have missed telephone appointments as they do not know what time to expect the call:

- We currently offer morning/afternoon slots, allowing clinicians to see patients order of those who they feel need help the quickest. We understand it is difficult to ask patients to be free to answer telephone calls any time between 8am-6pm. Please be assured we are currently trying to think of ways to alter this system, to suit both patient needs and that allows clinical triage to take place. We hope to provide an update on this soon.

Waiting times for hospital referrals is too long:

- Unfortunately, we are not in control of how fast a referral is processed and actioned by hospitals once this has been sent by our GP's. If your condition changes whilst waiting for your appointment date, please write us a letter explaining how your condition has deteriorated since the referral was made and we can send this onto the hospital for them to take into consideration. You can also view your referral on our website:

<https://www.saffronhealthpartnership.nhs.uk/choose-and-book-nhs-e-referral-tracking/>

Not enough availability for appointments:

- We can only offer a set number of appointments per day depending on the number of staff working on a given day. We have noticed that some patients are either seeking help too early in their condition (e.g., not finishing a course of antibiotics before requesting another appointment) or asking for a GP appointment for conditions that could initially be treated in a pharmacy. Please can we ask all patients to think carefully about whether they need a GP appointment or whether someone else may be able to help.

PCN's

Primary Care Networks (PCN's) were introduced in 2019 as part of a longer-term plan for supporting the growing demand for healthcare on the NHS. With an increase in population/life expectancy and a growth in diagnosed health conditions, PCN's are contracts that helps GP surgeries work together to deliver all-round care for patients.

SHP and Sandy Health centre formed **Sandhills Primary Care Network**. This does not mean we are merging, but that our patients will have access to a wider range of clinical staff and specialists to support them. All organisations have the shared goal of improving patients physical and mental needs and social wellbeing.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, our surgery has employed over 22 new members of staff, to combat the demand for work from COVID-19. These include:

- 12 Care Navigator roles and 4 Clinical data coding roles
- 2 Paramedics, 2 Practice Nurses and 1 Health Care Assistant
- 2 Salaried General Practitioners



The role of our Care Navigators

As highlighted on the previous page, our recent push in recruitment has led to SHP having the highest number of care navigators in our team than ever before. We have expanded our team to cope with the increased demand on primary health care, so that we can provide all the support necessary to our patients.

On average, it takes **9 months** to fully train a care navigator. They learn how all healthcare systems work together and are often best placed to help patients navigate through the increasingly complex and segmented NHS system. With this in mind, we kindly ask our patients to be sympathetic and understanding; occasionally our staff undergoing training will make mistakes, but we will always aim to fix these as quick as possible. Their only goal is to help you with your healthcare needs.

You will be aware that our care navigators' main duties include answering phone calls and attending to patients on reception, but did you know that they take on many other responsibilities in our surgery? These include:

- Answering your online dashboard (website) questions
- Monitoring and sorting through the email account
- Supporting our GP's and nurses with their workload
- Liaising with other external healthcare units (e.g., care homes, hospital consultants) to ensure integrated support for all aspects of our patient's health.

We understand that some of you view the questions our care navigators ask as intrusive, however we assure you the only reason they ask these is to make sure that each patient is booked in with the most appropriate clinician to help them and that no appointments are wasted. We have many clinical roles that care navigators can book you to see, including:

- GP's
- Minor Illness Nurses & Practice Nurses
- Health Care Assistants (HCA) and Phlebotomists
- Paramedics
- Physiotherapists
- Midwives
- Mental Health Link Worker
- Social Prescribers
- Pharmacists
- Community Pharmacy Consultation Service

Did you know that our care navigators answered nearly 20,000 telephone calls and responded to over 1,500 dashboard queries sent in by patients in April 2022?



Ways that you can help us help YOU!

There are several ways patients can access healthcare before seeing a GP. By utilising the community services offered allows GP appointments to be saved for those patients who need our care the most. Below is a list of ways patients can support us and still access the care necessary for them:

- Visit a pharmacy:

Pharmacists have expert knowledge and undergo extensive training, so are fully qualified to provide excellent medical advice and provide over-the-counter medicines.

- Community Pharmacy Consultation Service (CPCS):

This is a new service where our care navigators can refer you for a consultation with a community pharmacist, for minor illness treatment or to provide an urgent supply of patient's regular medications. Should the patient need further care, the pharmacist can arrange this.

- First Contact Physiotherapists (FCP):

30% of all GP appointments nationwide are musculoskeletal conditions. We now have FCP available at our sites to assess, who can give expert advice and refer for further care if needed.

- Wearing a face mask:

We are still asking patients to wear a facemask in our practice where possible, to keep both staff and patients safe. Having just 1 medical clinician and 1 care navigator off per week would have a detrimental impact on our work capacity.

- NHS 111 Symptom Checker:

This online tool can help to answer what condition you have, how severe it is, and when/where to get help. Find this on your NHS app, or on the NHS website <https://111.nhs.uk/>.

- Using our website for all non-urgent enquires:

You can find sick notes, referrals, advice on illnesses and seeking further treatment, advice and support for pre-existing conditions, health assessments, medication requests, 'Ask the Doctor' platforms and much more on our website:

<https://www.saffronhealthpartnership.nhs.uk/digitalpractice/consulting-room/>

- Attending Appointments:

If you have tried the above/they are not suitable for your needs, please call us to book to see a nurse or GP. Please make sure you attend all appointments (or let us know if you can't). Throughout April 2022, there were 351 appointments booked for patients where they did not attend, that could have been used for other patients,

- Ordering Medication in advance

Please make sure you order your prescriptions in plenty of time before running out of medication. It is not appropriate for our emergency list to have medication requests on where patients have forgot to order in time. If you need an emergency supply of medication, please speak to your pharmacy.

A note on blood tests – If a hospital consultant has requested that you have a blood test, please try and book this at the hospital where possible. We have limited blood appointments and would like to save them for GP requested bloods and those who cannot travel to hospitals. Click [here](#) to book at Lister Hospital and [here](#) to book at Bedford Hospital.



A Note from the Partners

“We are sorry to hear of the difficulties in getting appointments; this is not the service we strive to offer. Like many other Practices in the UK currently, we are struggling to meet the current level of demand for our services. We will continue to do our best each day to deliver as many appointments as it is *safe* to do so. Ultimately, we do not have unlimited resources and are currently working to maximum capacity.

We have invested in additional staff and revised hours of work to try and ensure we have sufficient staff in all areas of the surgery. Our data shows SHP provides on average 11,000 appointments per month. This equates to, on average, availability for 6 appointments, per person, per year.

The reality is that there are simply not enough GP’s and nurses to meet our current demand, which is putting immense pressure on the staff here. The increase in abuse, accusations and general negative attitudes towards staff and the surgery who work extremely hard does not do well to encourage more to join, or to retain the current staff.

We understand the frustration – we share these feelings with you, as we all want to help patients when they need it most. All we can do is guarantee that all staff will continue to work as hard as they can to deliver the best service possible, within the boundaries of resources available to them. In return we ask that you are kind and understanding to our staff and the situation SHP is in.

On a final note, we ask all our patients to remember that all staff at SHP still care about you, can we please ask that you still care about us.

To see further ways of how you can help, visit: [Support your surgery \(bma.org.uk\)](https://www.bma.org.uk)

The Partners

Drs A Taylor, A Low, A Edwards, M Acharya, S Higgins, N Olmas Berris, & C. Saravacas