June 2021

NHS
Devon
Clinical Commissioning Group

Dear Devon,

Your local GP practice teams in Devon, Plymouth and Torbay continue to work incredibly hard to support the health and care needs of our local communities.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing vaccination programme, they continued to care for people in the county. They have provided face to face, telephone and online support to patients who have needed it.

As a result of the pandemic, many local people's physical and mental health needs have increased.

In some cases, this is due to the lockdown measures in place and the impact this has had.

We also know that people delayed contacting their GP about their healthcare needs during this time because they didn't want to put pressure on vital services, or they were concerned about accessing healthcare during the pandemic. But now GP practices in Devon are busier than ever.

While practices have had to move to greater use of telephone and online appointments, they have continued to offer face to face appointments to those that need them.

You may be interested to know that in Devon, Plymouth and Torbay there have been:

- 4 million face to face appointments in general practice over the last year
- 2 million telephone consultations
- 500,000 online consultations

While the number reduced last year, almost 60% of the appointments with GP practices are now face to face in the county.

General practice has quickly and successfully set up and run COVID-19 vaccination centres on top of increasing demand. Over 700,000 doses of the vaccine have been given by general practice locally, in just five months since the launch of the programme.

This work has been carried out in addition to the day-to-day care GP practices have continued to provide their patients and local communities. As a result, you may have noticed a delay in being able to contact your practice or get an appointment when you want; this is in part due to the volume of patients trying to get through every day and the number of people needing our care. Practices are doing all they can to ensure you can contact them, including installing additional phone lines and offering online contact via their websites.

While face-to-face appointments continue to be offered based on clinical need, many issues can be resolved during a phone consultation without patients having to travel to a surgery. You should expect to be asked about your problems in advance by a member of the practice team. This is so that the practice team can ensure that your problem is dealt with quickly and effectively and you are directed to the most appropriate healthcare team for your needs.

Because of the number of people needing care, there are currently longer waits for routine appointments than usual at some practices. The NHS in Devon is doing all it can to reduce waiting times both in general practice and in the hospitals.

GP services are required to follow national guidelines to prevent the transmission of COVID. This includes social distancing and wearing face coverings. Please follow these requirements which are there to keep you and the GP team safe. Practices are still operating at reduced capacity in the buildings and have very limited space in waiting areas; appointment times are longer to allow for cleaning in between patients and changing of personal protective equipment by staff.

We understand how anxious people must feel when they simply want to talk to someone about a healthcare concern or worry and how frustrating it must be to not to be able to get through on the phone or have to wait for an appointment.

We are asking the people of Devon to continue to be patient with us. We are working hard to ensure access to all that need us, but we need your support to help us do this.

Our staff care about their patients and are simply trying to do their best to support everyone's healthcare needs in the most suitable way, despite the current levels of demand.

Before contacting your GP, you can look up your symptoms online using the NHS App, the NHS website or 111 online and there may be steps you can take to help yourself before needing to contact a healthcare professional.

You can also continue to support us by seeking help when you need it from the most appropriate service. There are a range of options to get help in addition to your GP surgery:

Pharmacy
As lockdown eases, don't forget your local pharmacist can provide health advice and help with minor illnesses like colds, rashes, sunburn, hay fever and diarrhoea. You don't need an appointment and they can even provide you with the right medicines at the same time.

Mental Health
If you, or someone you know, is struggling with their mental wellbeing, our 24/7 mental health lines are available:

- Devon and Torbay – 0808 196 8708
- Plymouth - 0800 923 9323

111 First
Our NHS 111 service is available 24/7 to provide advice, treatment and care. Just ring 111 or visit 111.nhs.uk and the service will provide advice and refer you to another service if you need it. If you need to be seen in person, they can book you a time slot.

Minor injury units
Emergency Departments are for life-threatening emergencies. There is a network of minor injury units in Devon who can provide the treatment you need – often they'll see you quicker, and closer to home.

Thank you for your understanding and support.

Dr Paul Johnson
Chair

Jane Milligan
Chief executive