

Old School Surgery
Covid-19 Update September 2021 – Keeping our community Safe.

All too often we hear the comments: When are the GPs returning to work? Why are GP practices closed? Why can't I make an appointment to be seen? Why can't I attend the Practice to make an appointment/order or collect a prescription? What are they doing down there?

We would like to reassure all our patients that the GPs and administration staff are still working within the premises, as they have done so since the beginning of the pandemic. From the outset the Department of Health stipulated that we must work within strict infection control measures. As a Practice we must comply with these guidelines and this has dictated many of our working arrangements, systems and procedures. We appreciate that the service is not the same as prior to COVID-19 and it is not ideal for everyone. As you are aware, our waiting room was often full of patients who were unwell. Many of these patients have temperatures, coughs, colds or flu like symptoms which are indicative of COVID-19. As a Practice we therefore play a pivotal role in helping to eliminate the spread of COVID-19 within our community. We also have a duty of care to protect patients who are required to attend the premises, as well as the GPs and staff who are committed to providing a high level of service.

We recently conducted an audit in respect of patient contacts and Practice workload for a 12 month period from April 2020 to May 2021. This audit aimed to demonstrate the volume of telephone consultations and face to face contacts with patients. This audit also highlighted work undertaken by the Practice which the general public may not realise is happening in the background. The results of this audit are outlined below:

Practice Population	10,998
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GP telephone consultations conducted	26,579
Patients seen face to face by GP	5,799
Patients seen face to face by Practice Nurse	7,824
Patients seen face to face by Treatment Room	10,332
Total face to face or telephone consultations by the Practice	50,534
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Prescriptions (processed by administration staff/practice pharmacist and reviewed and signed by GP)	
Telephone consultations and prescriptions by Practice Pharmacist	12,904
Acute prescriptions for medication requested and processed	166,417
Repeat prescriptions for medication requested and processed	48,849
Total requests for medication and consultations by the practice	228,170
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Referrals, correspondence and Test Results	
Referrals made by the Practice	5,363

Letters received by private consultants and secondary care (processed by administration staff and actioned by a GP)	41,574
Test results received (processed by administration staff and actioned by a GP)	222,097
Total correspondence and results processed	269,034

Vaccinations provided by the Practice (excluding childhood Vaccinations)

Influenza Vaccination	3,323
Shingle Vaccinations	101
COVID-19 Vaccinations	4,451
Total Vaccinations	7,875

Nursing Homes

The Practice currently provides fortnightly nursing home visits. The frequency of visits increased during COVID-19 outbreaks within individual homes. Initially reviews were conducted by telephone, however these are now conducted on site.

2,143

Other Commitments

Covid Centre shifts worked by GPs	86 sessions
Whiteabbey Hospital Rehabilitation covered by GPs	92 sessions
Total shifts covered by GPs at Covid Centres and Whiteabbey (reduced cover at the Practice Premises)	178 Sessions

TOTAL recorded patient contacts and work related tasks by the Practice 557,927

We hope the above information enables you to see a percentage of the work carried out during an extremely challenging time for the Practice. This audit does not demonstrate all the work carried out by the Practice as there is large percentage which cannot be quantified, such as:

- Time dealing with each telephone call can vary considerable for both the administration team and the GPs.
- Telephone calls for enquiries and tasks not recorded in a patient's record. These includes calls requesting information which are not related to Practice business, such as requesting telephone numbers for other services, requesting hospital results, requests for Health and Care numbers.
- Telephone calls from third party departments, such as hospices, secondary care, social workers, nurse specialists, district nursing, nurse managers, insurance companies and solicitors.
- Subject access requests, DVLA Forms, General forms and insurance forms.

Over the past 18 months the Practice has continually reviewed services and implemented change within the guidelines and resources available.

We hope the information below explains some of these questions and offers options available at the Practice.

- There is a general misconception that GP practices have been closed since lockdown. We can assure you this has not been the case. During the first 2 weeks of lockdown the Practice noticed a decrease in patients requesting services. However, there has been a phenomenal increase in the demand for GP services. As a result our GPs are dealing with an exceptionally high volume of patients via the telephone system, as well as seeing patient face to face following an assessment.

Our GPs are also covering the Covid Centres. Covid Centres are essentially GP services which are not located at the premises. Any patient who contacts the Practice with any symptoms such as a high temperature (whatever the reason), cough etc. will be referred to a Covid Centre for a face to face assessment by a GP. By referring patients to a covid centre it enables the Practice to continue seeing patients for services such as childhood immunisations, cervical screening, provide essential treatment room services, chronic disease management or patients who have been assessed by the GPs and need to be seen face-to face. As GPs are covering these sessions it will often mean the Practice is operating with less GPs than normal. Recently the commitment to these centres has increased due to the rise of covid like symptoms within the community and it is anticipated that this will increase further over the winter months. Further information on the role of Covid Centres can be found at <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/covid-19/adapting-to-covid/covid-19-covid-centres-in-northern-ireland>

Our committed Practice and Treatment Room Nurses have also maintained essential services throughout the pandemic. As secondary care reduced outpatient services they **routinely** direct their patients to General Practice for routine blood tests or procedures on their behalf. This has placed our service under extreme pressure and reduced access to those patients who have been referred by the GPs at the Practice. As a Practice we have always offered a phlebotomy service on behalf of secondary care. However to enable the Practice to safely provide this service we require the patient to attend our Practice Nurse with the relevant labels and blood forms to ensure the results are returned to the requesting consultant/service.

We would also like to remind you that the GPs, nurses and administration staff are not immune to COVID-19 and are still required to isolate if they have a household member who has tested positive and attend for testing in line with government guidelines. In the event that a GP is isolating they will continued to work from home providing the same level of service as those working from the

premises. Understandably they cannot see patients face to face but will arrange for a colleague to carry out a face to face consultation if required. Unfortunately, due to the nature of work the administration team provide it is not possible to provide a similar service. As a result of Positive cases and isolation we have been working with reduced administration staff, nurses & GPs on a regular basis. We are aware the regulations with regards to Isolation have changed in the recent weeks; however, NHS staff are still required to isolate if a household member should test positive. We anticipate that this will also increase during the winter months and will have a direct impact on the service we can provide.

Regarding telephone triage and appointments within the Practice - A telephone triage system is still operational within the practice and will be for the foreseeable future; this is in line with government guidance. During your telephone consultation a GP will assess if the matter can be dealt with over the telephone, by prescribing medication, arrange a virtual consultation via Zoom or after a risk assessment ask you to attend the surgery for a face-to-face appointment. A majority of these calls can easily be dealt with during the telephone conversation; sometimes the GP will request a photo which can be emailed to a dedicated email account.

On behalf of the GP's the administration staff will ask a few questions when you request a GP telephone consultation. This will assist the administration team to direct you to the most appropriate member or the team i.e. queries regarding medication may be dealt with by the Practice Pharmacist & general administration queries can often be dealt with by the administration team.

Dr L Dwyer has recently joined the Practice. Dr Dwyer is a qualified doctor who is currently in specialist training to become a GP. She has extensive knowledge from working in Secondary Care and you may be offered a telephone consultation with Dr Dwyer. We have also advertised for a further salaried GP to provide additional sessions within the Practice.

We have recently noticed a marked increase in patients leaving letters requesting a consultation with the doctor. Unfortunately this cannot be used as a substitute to speaking to the GP and we ask you to ring from 8.30am to request a telephone consultation, if you feel you need seen by a GP.

- **Why we are unavailable on the telephone between 12.30pm & 2pm** - we would like to reassure you that the practice is not closed during this timeframe. During this time patients will still be attending the premises to be seen face to face with the GPs, as well as, administration appointments to enable patients to collect items such as fit notes, forms & urgent prescription. This dedicated time enables the administration staff to safely deal with administration tasks e.g. processing the online prescriptions and dedicated repeat prescription requests voicemail, processing correspondence received from secondary care and private consultation, scanning correspondence into patients

medical records and ensuring correspondence is forwarded for the appropriate member of the multidisciplinary team & following up on patient enquires etc

- **Attending the Premises** – As you are aware you can no longer visit the Practice to make appointments, request prescriptions, results or for general enquiries. In an effort to reduce the spread of covid 19 within the community and protect our staff you will not be permitted to enter the premises if you do not have a prearranged appointment.

To assist with patients who are required to attend the practice we have installed an intercom buzzer system at the front door. This system only offers a few minutes to ascertain the patients name prior to admitting them to the premises, if they have been asked to attend, are leaving a sample or lifting a prescription request form. Unfortunately we cannot deal with general enquires or take medication requests via the intercom due to the limited time available and patients waiting to enter the Premises.

Once you are in the waiting area you will notice that we have limited the number of patients allowed in the waiting area. We currently limit this to **8** patients at any time. This policy is in place to enable us to adhere to social distancing regulations which is only possible due to staggering our appointment times for GPs and nurses throughout the working day.

We have also introduced administration appoints which enable patient to attend the surgery to collect sick lines or medical forms. These must be prearranged with the administration team.

Following all patient attendances, were a face to face consultation is provided we are also required to implement enhanced infection control measures. Hand sanitisers are available on entering & exiting the premises and the GPs and nurses are required to carry out a thorough clean of all couches & chairs following a face to face consultation, this requires additional time for each appointment.

- **Need to order a prescription?** - Ordering a prescription at the practice has essentially remained unchanged. We do ask for 72 hours to process your request prior to collecting it from your nominated pharmacy, this is to enable the practice to process your request and allow sufficient time for your pharmacy to fulfil your prescription. If you need to order a prescription there are a number of options available:
 1. Register for online prescription ordering. This will enable you to order your medication 24 hour/7 days per week. Further information and registration form as available at: <https://www.theoldschoolsurgery.co.uk/info.aspx?p=19>
 2. Complete a prescription ordering form and post it in the letter box at the front door. A form can be downloaded from

<https://www.theoldschoolsurgery.co.uk/website/Z00385/files/Repeat%20Prescription%20Template%20Form.doc>

3. Record your request on paper with your name, address, DOB and medication with dose and post it in the letter box at the front door.
4. Contact the surgery by telephone between 11am- 12.30pm & 2.30pm – 4pm. Alternatively, between 8.30am & 5.30pm ring the surgery and select option 1, to leave your name, date of birth, address and name and strength of medication you require on our dedicated prescription line.
5. Post your request to the practice via royal mail.

Telephone System

We have now moved to a new telephone system which includes a call management system. When you contact the surgery may be advised where you are in the queue. We would remind you that you may be on hold longer than advised as the call(s) prior to you may take longer than expected. We currently have 16 telephone lines at the practice. Once these lines are in use you will hear the engaged tone, unfortunately despite the number of telephone lines we have a limited number of administration staff to deal with your calls and we are working within the resources available at the practice. Once you have been connected you will be provided with a number of options,

Press 0, if you need urgent medical assistance - you will be connected with a member of the administration team once they become available. *Please note - if you have a critical emergency you should dial 999 and not wait to be connected to a member of staff.

Press 1 - Repeat Prescriptions - you will be connected with a member of the administration team between the hours of 11.00am to 12.30pm & 2.30pm to 4.00pm. Outside these times until 5.30pm you can leave your name, date of birth, address and name and strength of medication you require. * Please note if you leave a message on the prescription line which is not related to medication your request will not be processed

Press 2 - to book a telephone consultation with the GP. Please note these consultations are limited & once they have been allocated each day you will be asked to ring the following day. The administration staff will ask questions on behalf of the doctor to ensure you are directed to the appropriate healthcare professional i.e. queries regarding medication will be directed to one of our Practice Based Pharmacists.

Press 3 - General Enquires.

Influenza Vaccination and Covid Boosters

We are currently in the process of organising vaccination for influenza and Covid boosters - This requires substantial planning & organisation to ensure everyone eligible is called for vaccination in a safe and structured way. It will also impact the service offered by the practice and place additional pressures on our telephone system as we deal with numerous queries.

General information

- **Face Coverings**

Face coverings are still required within the practice -All GPs and nurses are required to wear face masks & PPE during your consultation. Help us protect you - by protecting us!

If you feel you are exempt from wearing a mask or your employer has asked for a letter please be advised we do not supply these at the practice. Please visit

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own>

- **Children sent home from School**

If your child has been sent home from school due to a cough or cold please do not contact the surgery. You can book a covid test online or by contacting 119. You should only contact the practice if your child becomes unwell and their symptoms can no longer be managed at home. At this stage the GP will assess the situation and arrange a prescription, a face to face consultation or refer you to a covid centre.

- **Minor Ailments**

We are pleased to announce the Minor Ailments Scheme is operational once more within your local pharmacy. We would ask that you consider this service for minor ailments prior to contacting the practice. Further information on this scheme is available at your local pharmacy

- **Increase in Abuse towards our staff**

We appreciate that everyone is frustrated with the effects of covid 19. Over the past few months we have experienced a marked increase in abuse towards our GPs, nurses and administration staff. This type of behaviour cannot be tolerated, and ranges from offensive language to threats of violence towards individuals and derogatory/offensive remarks placed on social media. Such behaviour towards our staff may result in a break down in the relationship with the practice which could result

in removal from the Practice List. We are all working under extreme pressure and would ask for respect towards all staff.

Thank you!

Lastly, we would like to thank a large number of our patients & local community who have provided invaluable support and understanding throughout this pandemic. It has been challenging for everyone and all your acts of kindness are appreciated beyond words. Thank you!