



Dear Lancaster Medical Practice patients, we know that there have been a lot of difficulties recently in terms of both contacting the practice and booking appointments. We want to say that we know we are not getting some things quite right at the moment and we are committed to providing a better service for you. All of our teams are working very hard behind the scenes to make these changes.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact our services and keeping our patients safe remains a priority; whilst our COVID-19 vaccination programme has delivered over 40,000 vaccinations, which as you can imagine has stretched both our clinical and administration teams' resources considerably. Our phone lines have been exceptionally busy – at times to a degree that we have never seen before, and this has prevented many patients from being able to get through. Our telephone system only lets a certain number of patients from being able to get through. Our dedicated reception team are committed to answering these incoming phone calls, which can sometimes be as high as 1600 per day. However at times we have been unable to process requests in a timeframe that is acceptable.

As we are an essential service there has been no furlough or option to work from home for most of our staff; and as with any business, we have had to deal with shortages as staff are required to self-isolate. This has put additional pressure on our services as the wider team is required to cover those shortages. Our teams have also been here for you throughout the pandemic, our doors have been open every single day. Every member of our team has gone above and beyond, putting themselves and their families at risk, particularly in the early days when we knew very little about COVID-19. This is all for you, our patients, so we can continue to provide care for those who need us.

We believe that it is also important that our patients are aware that this is not a localised issue. GP practices across the UK have seen a huge increase in demand over recent months – national data shows that GP appointments have increased by 18% compared to March 2020 and 11% compared to March 2019. In essence, GP practices are operating at reduced capacity due to the pandemic, whilst experiencing demand higher than that seen before COVID-19. Although these figures provide context for the current situation, we do not want to use this as an excuse – we are determined to work to provide a better service and we are taking your feedback very seriously.

What are we doing to change?

As we move out of lockdown, we are introducing a series of measures to ease the pressure on our phone lines and introduce additional appointments. Our new appointment system and reopening of sites will allow more availability for both face-to-face and telephone appointments, whilst also reducing the pressures on our phone lines as patients no longer need to call multiple times for the same issue. The gradual reintroduction of our online services will also help to reduce telephone waiting times and make booking routine appointments much easier. Also, changes to the way our clinicians work together will improve the continuity of care that our patients experience and therefore provide better and faster treatment. While these changes will make a positive difference to our services, they will come into effect over a period of time so we must ask that you bear with us over the coming weeks and months.

Some of these changes have been introduced this week. Firstly, Meadowside Medical Practice has reopened as an additional 'COVID Amber site' - meaning we are able to offer additional face-to-face

appointments to patients without symptoms of COVID-19. It will operate as our other amber sites do – you will need to use the intercom to enter the building, and your temperature will be checked upon entry. We have taken the necessary precautions to ensure that the site is COVID safe, but please remember to bring a face covering with you and maintain social distancing with other patients.

The ability to book a call back slot via the myGP app has also been reopened. This service allows you to request a call from one of our reception staff rather than waiting on the phone. If you are not registered with online services, then you will need to ring the practice to get set up – but after that you will have access to the call back slots.

What can you do to help?

Whilst we are introducing measures to improve our phones and increase appointment availability, we must ask that you also help us and your fellow patients by using our services in the best way.

When contacting the practice by phone for an urgent matter, please call us as early in the day as you can. If your query is not urgent, then calling later in the day will free up the phone lines in the morning and allow us to deal with the most urgent cases appropriately.

Please also think carefully as to whether your query needs to be dealt with by your GP practice. Other community services such as local pharmacies, or engaging with self-care may be the best way to deal with your issue – you can find lots of useful information and advice on who you need to be seen by on the NHS website.

We hope that this has highlighted the pressures that general practice is experiencing at the moment, and the steps that we will be taking to improve our patient services. We really appreciate the continued patience and compliance shown by our patients and we are committed to continuing to listen to your feedback and change our workings appropriately.

Thank you.

The Partners of Lancaster Medical Practice