



# Patient Update – June 2022

Dear Patients

I am writing to you all to update you on the current situation at our practice.

## **Firstly, thank you for helping us to prioritise our urgent appointments for our more vulnerable patients**

We have listened to your feedback via the recent PPG Survey, through correspondence with the surgery and through our “Friends and Family Questionnaire” (which is available on our website) and we know that you are sometimes finding it difficult to access appointments.

We fully appreciate how frustrating it can be when faced with long waits on the phone followed by difficulty obtaining appointments when you need them. We are hoping that by writing this letter we can explain to you why this is happening and what the surgery is doing to try and address these issues.

Demand for our services is up considerably, even on pre-pandemic levels. Across England there were 5.4 million more appointments offered in general practice in March 2022 than in the same period of 2020.

We are one of the smallest practices in Milton Keynes (looking after the medical needs of 8,400 patients) which means we are disproportionately affected by staff absences. When a clinician is absent, we have to rearrange their booked patients to other clinicians, which impacts on our capacity for that day or week. Unfortunately, this is why we sometimes have to cancel appointments at short notice.

As well as carrying out routine clinics clinicians also have to undertake a considerable amount of administration work such as signing prescription (on average we process 200 a day), reviewing test results, writing referrals, undertaking medicals, writing reports and carrying out audits. All our GPs work six clinical sessions a week and work alternate Saturday mornings. In order to keep on top of workload they are also working remotely often working 50 hours a week in total. We have found it increasingly difficult to secure locum cover and many of the staff are regularly working overtime to cover extra shifts when we have gaps.



Our phone lines are very busy with up to 600 calls coming in a day. Our Reception staff are working hard to answer them as quickly as possible. They also carry out other tasks such as processing repeat prescription requests, manning the front desk, calling patients to relay messages when asked to by other staff and checking emails and communications through our website.

We have unfortunately had some turnover in the Reception team recently due to the pressures they are experiencing, and we have a number of new team members currently undergoing training.

Over the course of the pandemic, we adapted our appointment model to try to maximise appointment availability for patients. A lot of the services and requirements previously undertaken before the Covid pandemic were put on hold (at the request of the Government) to enable us to continue to meet patient needs. Gradually over the last 6 months, these requirements have been reinstated with full implementation from the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2022.

Pressures elsewhere in the health system – such as in hospitals or with community services – also have an impact on GP practices. The number of people on the waiting list for a hospital outpatient appointment increased from 4 million in 2020 to nearly 6.1 million in Dec 2021. The waiting time for some specialities at MKUH is now 12 months. Patients waiting for treatment will sometimes come to us to try and chase up a referral or help them manage their condition better at home while they await specialist input. This is having an impact on our appointment availability. The hospital has asked us not to try to expedite appointments for patients as they want everyone to wait their turn and we understand this is frustrating for patients.

We also need to highlight that we do not have a limitless amount of funding, staff or appointments. Each day we have an on-call GP whose role is to deal with serious urgent problems from patients when we have no bookable appointments left. We have a few patients who insist on a “same day” appointment for what is not a medically urgent problem, and this means fewer appointments are available for those in genuine need.

Since the New Year we have been offering patients the option to choose between a routine face-to-face and telephone appointment at the point of booking.

We are writing this letter to help you understand that we are doing our best as a practice in what continues to be a very difficult time for the NHS.

We are trying to resolve these issues by:

- Appointing a new a GP Partner (we are currently advertising)
- Installing a new phone system which allows patients to use a “call back option” instead of waiting on the line and provides us with more flexibility to divert calls at source.



- Providing a cancellation line which allows patients to easily cancel their appointments without having to wait to speak to a receptionist to do so – this frees up the appointment for another patient.
- Recruiting additional staff through the Primary Care Network which we are part of (Crown) to help to meet the increased demand. We have a part-time Pharmacist, Care Coordinators, a Social Prescriber and a Primary Care Mental Health Practitioner. Further information about these roles can be found on our website. <https://www.cobbsgardensurgery.co.uk/>
- Bidding for funding to move to larger premises, as we are currently constrained by the size of the building. With additional space we would aim to become a GP training practice which would help us to retain, recruit and increase GP availability.

### What you can do to help

- **Do you need to see a doctor?**
  - Consider if the surgery should be your first port of call. Your local community pharmacy (Cox and Robinson) can help with a range of common problems, and some can even see you and prescribe medication for certain conditions.
  - There are many conditions for which the clinician will not prescribe medication as there are available over the counter. <https://www.nhs.uk/common-health-questions/medicines/why-cant-i-get-prescription-over-counter-medicine>
  - You can also call NHS 111 or visit [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk) for information on how to manage certain conditions and what symptoms to look out for. We are still seeing many problems that do not need a GP appointment.
- **Have you looked at our website?** If you can, please visit our website to find information on non-urgent and administrative queries. [www.cobbsgardensurgery.co.uk](http://www.cobbsgardensurgery.co.uk) which will help reduce the number of calls coming in. You will also find links for self-referrals to some local services on our website as well as a link to order repeat prescriptions.
- **Cancel unwanted appointments** If you are unable to attend an appointment, please call the surgery number by leaving a message on our “cancellation line”. We are still experiencing a high number of appointments where patients do not attend and do not tell us – meaning we cannot offer those appointments out to other people.



- **We can't expedite your referral** Please do not book appointments asking for the doctor to expedite a referral or chase up the hospital on your behalf. If you are struggling because an appointment or procedure has been delayed or cancelled, you should contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) at the hospital you have been referred to.
- **Support our Reception team** Our team work to a protocol designed by our GPs which enables them to signpost you to the right person. We have a multidisciplinary team here at the surgery with staff other than GPs who can help with a wide range of problems. They are highly skilled and many of them can arrange prescriptions, scans and other investigations without the need for a GP appointment. The more information you provide the higher the chances of you being signposted to the correct team member.

Please have patience with the Reception team – some of them are new and learning the role, and they are all doing their best to support you.

- **Please do not make simultaneous phone calls** from different devices in order to try get through more quickly. The first call you make will be given a place in the queuing system. Please do use the telephone call back facility when you are able to so that you don't have to wait on the telephone, and so those that need more urgent attention get through more quickly.
- **Please do not book a blood test unless a clinician has asked you to.**
- **Please do not bring "ad hoc" samples** to the surgery for testing. The Reception team can only accept appropriately labelled samples that have been requested by a clinician.

### **We appreciate your patience and support at this time.**

Cobbs Garden Surgery is committed to providing a high-quality service to you and we want to assure you that we are doing everything we can to maximise availability of appointments.

We are working closely with the surgery's Patient Participation Group (PPG) (<https://www.cobbsgardensurgery.co.uk/practice-information/patient-participation-group>) to address the issues that are being raised by patients and thank them for their support and commitment at this busy time.

The Partners , Cobbs Garden Surgery

June 2022

