

Current pressures in General Practice and changes to the way The Old Fire Station (TOFS) is working

We are fully aware that many of you have been experienced either difficulties in contacting the surgery over the last few weeks or difficulties in obtaining appointments. We understand that this can cause frustration, upset and sometimes anger.

We are working hard to try and make changes that will improve access for you, which are detailed below. Unfortunately, there are several factors that have led us to this point, and we have tried to outline some of these for you. We hope this may help you understand the difficulties general practice is currently facing.

On behalf of the staff at The Old Fire Station Surgery, we thank you for your understanding at this difficult time.

Wessex LMC (Local Medical Council) statement August 16th 2021

New data released by the NHS covering Hampshire, Dorset, Wiltshire and part of Somerset has thrown a spotlight on the huge increase in workload faced by GP practices as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

The number of appointments offered has risen by an average of 11.8% compared to July two years ago – with Hampshire facing the biggest increase at 16.4%. This includes Southampton.

As well as a GP shortage, there has been further pressure caused by population growth, a rise in people seeking mental health support and a backlog of routine treatment. GP surgeries have also had to adapt to new ways of working, introduced new technology for online appointments and given Covid patients oxygen saturation equipment to monitor them remotely. They have also carried out far more flu jabs than ever before.

Wessex Local Medical Committees (LMC), which represents the region's GPs and practices, is urging patients to be far more understanding of the pressure their local surgeries are under.

Dr Gareth Bryant, Acting Chief Executive of the LMC and a GP in Wiltshire, said: "We are not looking for sympathy, just a better understanding of what we are coping with. Our GP practices have faced unprecedented demand, partly due to delivering the Covid vaccination programme and supporting patients who are ill with coronavirus, and also because they are being affected by the backlog elsewhere in the NHS.

"At the same time, there is a national shortage of GPs and practices are adapting as best they can by recruiting other staff to their teams such a physiotherapists, mental health practitioners and pharmacists. They are trying to get through appointments as best they can but there may be some delays. The Government has promised that more GPs will be recruited but it's not happening at the speed or the levels we need.

Changes at TOFS

1) Staff changes

We are currently experiencing staff changes which may unfortunately impact on the service that we provide in the short term.

- Our Medicines Manager Danielle Norgate has now left the practice. Georgina Waite is our new MM who has a wealth of experience to offer but is new to primary care and specifically to this role. Over the next 6months, Georgina will be undertaking training to ensure this service remains a high-quality service at the surgery.
- Chronic disease nurse – Unfortunately, after 18years, Sarah McLoughlin has decided to leave the practice for new challenges. She will certainly be sadly missed by both staff and patients, who have become accustomed to the excellent service she provided. Sarah left 26th August 2021.

We are welcoming a very experienced chronic disease nurse to the surgery called Pema Brown who will be starting on October 1st 2021. Pema has a wealth of knowledge and experience with many chronic conditions, most noticeably Diabetes. Pema will be working 2days a week in this role.

Due to a gap in time, where Sarah leaves and Pema starts, there will understandably be a significant shortfall in appointments. If you have urgent queries whilst waiting, then please contact the reception team.

- Advanced Nurse Practitioners
18months ago, we employed our first ANP Tamsin Hill to the surgery, whose primary focus is emergency. ANP's are highly trained and experienced nurses, who can undertake clinical assessments, fully examine, diagnose and manage multiple medical problems. If needed, they will discuss patients with the GPs. Tamsin has been an excellent asset to both the surgery and triage team, and we are now expanding our ANP triage workforce.

Pema is not only going to undertake chronic disease checks but is also going to be triaging patients 2 days a week.

Maria Hernandez-Diaz is currently working at UHS in both coronary ITU and the surgery department. She will be starting work with us undertaking 2 days a week triage from 25th October.

- General Practitioner – Dr Stansfield
Due to personal reasons, Dr Stansfield sadly left the surgery on the 10th of June. Despite ongoing advertisement, like many surgeries throughout both Southampton and the UK, we have not been able to recruit a new GP to replace his 3 days a week. Unfortunately, there is a significant workforce shortage

throughout both Southampton and the UK, which means that even obtaining locum GPs to fill gaps in the service is proving incredibly difficult.

We fully understand and appreciate, that a lack of available appointments directly impacts your ability to contact the surgery. All our remaining GPs are working incredibly hard to meet patient's needs, but it is inevitable that we cannot meet the current demand. We do ask, that given the circumstances, that you be patient with us, but that if you feel your need is urgent, that you do contact triage. We of course do not wish any patient in our care to come to harm.

Due to lack of GP recruitment, we still need to ensure a safe and effective service. This will mean new ways of working that we hope patients will embrace. Although traditionally the first point of contact with regards to many medical problems may have been the GP, this will no longer be the case and is one of the reasons we are expanding our workforce including ANPs, physio, social prescriber and soon to be, mental health worker. This is also the reason, why the reception team will now ask you for a brief description of your medical problem, to ensure that you are directed to the most appropriate member of the team. We therefore ask, that you do provide details where possible.

- Other Allied Health Care Professionals (AHPs)
4 surgeries in our area have come together to create a Primary Care Network (PCN). These are Woolston Lodge, St Peters and Townhill. Together, we are employing staff that will serve all four practices.

Many of you will already be familiar with the 1st contact physio service which commenced several months ago and has been very successful to date. We have also employed a pharmacist and social prescriber, and we hope to employ many more over the coming few months and years.

2) New service to access the GP surgery

The beginning of the pandemic National Health Service England (NHSE) informed us that every patient who requested a face-to-face appointment must undergo prior triage via online access or telephone assessment and this guidance has not changed. Triage is where every patient must be assessed, and their needs subsequently prioritised by a clinician.

Due to NHSE guidance, as well as our GP shortage and increased demand for appointments, we have decided to trial a new service that several other surgeries already use, which is to call on the day for both ongoing and acute problems. This gives everyone a daily opportunity to have access for all medical problems.

Like any new service, we are going to have to monitor it over a period to see how the service embeds before deciding if any changes need to be made. We understand that this new service may not suit all, but no service ever will. We are also facing a backlog of ongoing medical problems that need to be dealt with both due to covid and due to our ongoing clinician shortage.

How it works:

Depending on staff available that day (we try and ensure an even distribution throughout the week) we will offer a certain number of appointments. Most of these appointments will be available from the time our appointment line opens at 08.45, but we will hold a proportion back so that there are still some emergency appointments available in the afternoon. Our triage team will try and get through as many appointments as they can, but inevitably, some triage calls will take several hours to be called. Following triage, we will manage as appropriate, including bringing patients to the surgery to be seen face to face if needed.

Again, we understand that many of you are used to face to face appointments. However, this is not always required and our efficiency will be increased if we can manage patient problems by a combination of both telephone and face to face, as appropriate to do so. We have also noticed a significant reduction in DNAs (Did not attend)

- Other means of seeking advice
There are other services available locally and online to help with common minor conditions. These include:
 - Minor ailments scheme – run by certain pharmacies
 - Urgent treatment centre – based at the Royal South Hampshire hospital
 - www.nhs.uk – information on many health conditions
 - www.what0-18.nhs.uk – Healthier Together, resource for those with children

You can seek help and guidance without contacting the GP surgery, or if we have already reached our capacity that day.

3) Telephone lines

In response to requests by patients, we have changed the phone service so that you are now provided with a queuing system.

We apologise, as there were some teething problems at the change over and staff have worked hard to correct this. We have also increased the quantity of lines available for the surgery.

4) E-consults

The demand for this service has risen hugely since the onset of covid. Unfortunately, we were struggling to keep up with the number of submissions as well as triaging patients and there became a lengthy delay in replying. For patient safety, we have suspended this service, although you can still obtain advice via e-consult. We are aware that this was a convenient service for many, which we do hope to restart again in the future.

We hope that this information provides you with a thorough update of the surgery changes and the current demand on the service. We anticipate that the upcoming changes will improve the service. Thank you for your ongoing patience at this difficult time.