

17<sup>th</sup> September 2021

Dear Patient,

### **Provision of General Practice Services at Crewkerne Health Centre**

We are aware that many people are getting frustrated with the service currently being provided by Crewkerne Health Centre. We are in regular contact with our Patient Participation Group and have received several letters from patients, concerning difficulties with access and availability of appointments. Concerns have also been raised about a perceived lack of continuity of care. We felt that it was important to write to you, to explain the reasons for the current levels of service provision and outline the steps that we are taking to improve the situation.

Alongside our colleagues in hospitals and community care, General Practice is currently experiencing a period of demand never seen before. At Crewkerne Health Centre, our patient contacts have tripled since before the COVID-19 pandemic; with around 90 appointment requests on a busy day in February 2020 and over 280 requests on a busy day in July 2021. At the same time, we have provided leadership to 'phase 1' of the COVID vaccination programme, running a successful Local Vaccination Service at the *Henhayes Centre* between December 2020 and June 2021. We have also been managing increasing volumes of chronic disease, caused by delays in hospital intervention associated with the pandemic. This has been compounded, by a national shortage of GPs and Nurse Practitioners, alongside additional recruitment challenges in our rural community.

We know that access to the surgery has been difficult for our patients, particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Shortages in both reception and regular clinical staff, are exacerbating the situation. We continue to advertise for new staff, and additional training is being provided to maximise efficiency of processes and ensure the level of service that we would expect. We have had some success in recruiting telephony staff (six new call-handlers), and we are working to improve our telephone response rates. We have introduced a call-back service, which maintains your position in the telephone queue, without the need to stay on the phone. We have been paying for locum GPs and Nurse Practitioners to support our regular workforce. We have recruited an Advanced Physiotherapy Practitioner, who is providing enhanced musculoskeletal services, and have expanded our team of Pharmacists and Pharmacy Technicians to support safe prescribing. We are also pleased to report success in recruiting two additional regular GPs, who are currently receiving induction training and will start seeing patients within the next fortnight. This increases our total regular GP workforce to ten (5.75 whole-time-equivalent) GPs.

In July, we made the difficult decision to disable the *AskmyGP* digital consultation platform. We know that patients liked this service, which improved access and reduced telephone pressures. Due to the operating style of this system, including a free text box which lacks structured questioning on symptoms, along with the huge volume of requests received, we could not manage the levels of demand in a safe

and effective manner. We are currently reviewing an alternative system, which should be a better solution. We are also changing processes within the surgery, to improve the way we handle queries. Until we feel confident that we have a system which will work, we do not wish to create further disappointment by switching *AskmyGP* back on. We will keep you updated through our website and social media platforms as things progress.

In alignment with NHS guidance during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we continue to offer telephone triage for appointments at our surgery. We have also been using a digital platform called *AccuRx* to aid communication. This allows us to offer video-consultations, direct messaging to mobile phones or email, and to gather additional information to aid diagnoses. We have adopted processes to ensure that we do not disadvantage patients who struggle with technology and are working with *South Somerset District Council* to support people who need training or assistance with digital tools. Throughout the pandemic, we have continued to offer face-to-face appointments at the surgery and home visits to patients who need them. We have provided a 'red zone' site, for the assessment of unwell patients, suspected to be infected with COVID-19. We have undertaken regular ward rounds within our local care homes and supported-living facilities, along with outreach work to the most vulnerable groups in our community. We remain committed to providing the highest standards of care to our patients, despite these challenging times.

To support the work being done in the surgery, we are pleased to announce that Luena Eeles has joined as our new Practice Manager. She has replaced Ruth Bagg, who has recently left the practice. Luena is being supported by Drs Tim Quinlan and John Horne, who are providing Clinical Leadership, alongside Kirsty Sansum, our Lead Nurse. This leadership team are continuing to review and improve processes within the surgery for the benefit of our patients. We are confident that working alongside our established practice team, they will enable the necessary changes to occur.

Crewkerne Health Centre benefits significantly by being part of Symphony Healthcare Services (SHS). Realistically, without the support of SHS, Crewkerne Health Centre and West One Surgery might have closed. The support of the organisation has ensured continuation of healthcare services in Crewkerne and the surrounding area. As a practice, we are embedded within the SHS team and, working collectively with the other nineteen practices within the organisation, we are much stronger together.

We hope that this letter has helped to reassure you that we are aware of the difficulties patients are experiencing and that significant work is taking place within Crewkerne Health Centre to improve patient care. This work has already received some recognition. We are pleased to report that despite the existing challenges, at our recent re-inspection in July, CQC rated us as 'Good' for the quality of care that we provide. Nevertheless, we are aware that there remains much work to be done, to develop the service into one that meets our own expectations.

Over the past few years, we know that we have increasingly asked for your patience and support. We continue to ask for your support now, as we work to achieve the efficient and high-quality care that you deserve. We appreciate all the feedback that patients have taken the time to submit and ask that you continue to share your

experiences in a compassionate manner with us, so that we can continue to learn and develop.

Yours faithfully,



**Dr T Quinlan**  
**GP / Co-Clinical Lead**



**Dr J Horne**  
**GP / Co-Clinical Lead**



**Mrs L Eeles**  
**Practice Manager**



**Mr R Meades**  
**Vice Chair, Crewkerne PPG**

**Mr D Hughes**  
**Chair, Crewkerne PPG**

## **Frequently Asked Questions:**

### **Why is it so difficult to get through to the surgery on the phone?**

We are aware that patients are experiencing difficulties getting through on the telephone. This is the result of staff shortages and previously unseen levels of demand. We are working to recruit and train more call handlers to improve the situation. In the meantime, please feel free to use the call-back service, which maintains your place in the call queue, and one of our call handlers will return your call.

### **Why has *AskmyGP* been switched off?**

We know that patients liked this service. It improved access and reduced pressures on the telephone system. Unfortunately, due to the style of the digital platform, including a free text box with lack of structured questioning on symptoms, along with the large volume of requests received at the practice, we were not able to manage the demand safely and effectively. We are currently looking at an alternative digital consultation system and are working to improve our internal processes. We will keep you informed of progress.

### **Why can't I speak to the same GP each time I contact the practice?**

The pressures of work in General Practice, alongside additional roles required from Primary Care, mean that most GPs no longer work in fulltime clinical duties. To provide continuity, GPs work as a team to manage patient care, recording agreed management plans within medical records. Where patients genuinely need a named lead GP (e.g., for complex psychological and medical problems, or end of life care), we will always attempt to provide this. Due to national shortages of GPs and recruitment challenges associated with our rural community, we have needed to employ locum (short-term) GPs to allow safe levels of service provision. We are pleased to report that we have recently managed to recruit two new regular GPs, who are currently receiving induction training and will start seeing patients within the next two weeks.

### **Are you still offering face-to-face appointments and visits?**

Yes. We have continued to provide both face-to-face appointments and home visits throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Following NHS guidance, and to ensure the safety of our patients and staff, we continue to offer an initial telephone consultation to determine the most efficient way to manage queries. We may ask for this telephone call to be converted into a video consultation where possible or ask for photos and other supportive information to be sent into the practice digitally. However, please rest assured that if we feel you need an examination, we will offer you an appointment at the surgery or will visit your home if you are unable to attend. If you are unwell and have symptoms of COVID-19 infection, you may be asked to attend our 'red zone' for assessment. This is to ensure that other patients are kept safe.

## **Who are Symphony Healthcare Services and what is their relationship with Crewkerne Health Centre?**

Symphony Healthcare Services (SHS) is a vanguard NHS organisation, wholly owned and financed by Yeovil District Hospital NHS Foundation Trust. SHS was set up to provide resilience to Primary Care across Somerset. SHS works with Somerset CCG, NHS England, local hospital trusts and other service providers, to improve healthcare across Somerset. Amongst other roles, the organisation supports surgeries which are struggling or at risk of closing, often taking over their contract to ensure continuation of healthcare provision. SHS currently runs 20 practices from 16 sites across Somerset and North Devon, providing medical care for around 120,000 patients. Practices work collaboratively with a small senior leadership team, with the aim of improving quality of patient care and enhancing service provision. Crewkerne Health Centre is a member of the SHS team and is much stronger for it. Realistically, without the intervention and support from SHS, Crewkerne Health Centre and West One Surgery might have closed.

## **Why did West One Surgery and Crewkerne Health Centre merge?**

In 2018, we were asked by NHS England and Somerset CCG, to take over the running of West One Surgery. At this point, Crewkerne Health Centre and West One Surgery merged, to ensure the ongoing provision of medical services for patients registered at West One Surgery. This merger unveiled several shortcomings in the management of patients previously registered to West One Surgery. Shortly afterwards, the practice was rated as 'Requires Improvement' by the Care Quality Commission (CQC), the regulators of Health and Social Care within England. This was followed by extensive work in collaboration with the CQC, Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and NHS England to make improvements. The knock-on effects of the practices coming together continue to resonate within the surgery even now, as we struggle to resolve prescribing issues and align medical management to current evidence-based practice.

## **What can I do to help?**

We are hugely grateful for the patience and support we receive from our patients. Please bear with us, as we navigate these exceptionally challenging times and work to improve the quality of service we provide. We appreciate measured and constructive feedback, which enables us to learn and improve. We are thankful for the direction and input provided by our Patient Participation Group (PPG). There are several practice activities which occur throughout the year, for which we rely on the support of our patients and community. These include our vaccination programmes and community outreach activities. If you are able to offer any practical support, we are always happy to receive this. Please contact our Practice Manager or our PPG if you would like to be involved. If you would like to find out more information regarding the PPG or express a wish to join it, please contact our Chair, David Hughes, at: [crewkerneppgchair@gmail.com](mailto:crewkerneppgchair@gmail.com)