

Old School Surgery

Covid-19 Update September 2020 – 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 GP’s and administration staff are still working within the Premises, as they have done so since the beginning of lockdown. We appreciate that the service is not the same as pre-covid 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 had temperatures, coughs, colds or flu like symptoms which are now 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 have provided a high level of service throughout the Pandemic.

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 at the practice. However, over the past 7 months 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.

Our GPs are also covering the Covid Centres during the working day. 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 child hood immunisations, cervical screening, essential treatment room services, chronic disease management or patients who have been assessed by the GP’s 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 Nurses and treatment room Nurses have also maintained essential services throughout the pandemic. During the initial lockdown stages 50% of our nursing staff were redeployed, however we still maintained a high volume of patient appointments at the practice. As secondary care reduced all 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.

We would also like to remind you that the GPs, Nurses and administration staff are not immune to Covid 19 and are required to shield, isolate and require testing in line with government guidelines. This has resulted in the Practice working with reduced administration staff, nurses & GPs on a regular basis. 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 & appointments within the practice** - In March 2020 following government guidance the practice suspended all routine booking of appointments and moved towards a GP telephone triage system. This telephone triage system is still operational within the practice and will be for the foreseeable future. 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.

We are currently reviewing how we manage the telephone triage system as it has now reached an unattainable level to enable the practice to continue providing a safe service to our patient. We would advise you to register for our online newsletter or visit our website to ascertain up to date information.

- **Attending the Premises** - Unfortunately 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 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 6 patients at any time. This policy is in place to enable us to adhere to social distancing regulations and is only possible due to staggering our appointment times for GPs and nurses throughout the working day.

Following all patient attendances we are also required to implement enhanced infection control measures. Hand sanitisers are available on entering the premises. However, following each face to face assessment the GPs and nurses are required to carry out a thorough clean of all couches & chairs. This has added addition time to 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.
 5. Post your request to the practice via royal mail.

General information

- **Face Coverings**

In line with Government guidelines which came into effect in August 2020 you are now required to wear a face covering when attending the practice. Whilst we recognise there are a few exemptions we would encourage you to wear a covering which covers your nose and mouth prior to entering the premises. 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

- **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

- **Flu vaccination**

We are in the process of preparing for our Vaccination Programme and have already seen a marked increase in queries regarding vaccination. As you can imagine it will be extremely challenging for the practice during the pandemic as we need to implement additional measures to ensure our patients and staff are protected. It is anticipated that there will be a marked increase in patients requesting the vaccination compared to previous years and we are looking at ways in which we manage this while still offering essential services.

The categories for vaccination remain unchanged at present with the exception of children in year 8; this will be offered in School. **We would strongly encourage all children from P1 to Year 8 to accept the vaccination in the school setting as the Practice will have difficulty accommodating additional vaccinations at the practice.** All eligible patients will receive notification by letter in October and we would ask that you **DO NOT** contact the surgery with general enquires regarding vaccination as our telephone system is already under extreme pressure.

- **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, which ranges from offensive language to threats of violence towards individuals, cannot be tolerated. We are all working under extreme pressure and would ask for respect towards all staff.

Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! 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 from supplying essentials items, face masks, food or simply asking 'how we are' is appreciated beyond words. Thank you!