

## **Statement from the Partners and Management Team of Holderness Health**

We are aware that there have been many posts on various social media sites over recent weeks regarding the practice and a protest scheduled to take place on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> September 2021. We are keen to hear any concerns regarding our service and have well-established structures for patients to provide us with feedback, including our feedback email address (eryccg.feedback.holdernesshealth@nhs.net) and our complaints process.

We gather from the social media posts that the concerns relate primarily to access and the future of healthcare in Withernsea.

We have listened carefully to patient requests for greater access and better continuity of care and we have adjusted our appointment system to try and accommodate both these things. We have significantly increased the number of appointments we are offering compared with pre-pandemic levels and are happy to share information regarding appointment numbers. This has been achieved through a combination of recruiting more doctors, utilising a wider range of healthcare professionals and offering a blend of telephone and face-to-face appointments. A return to only face-to-face appointments would result in fewer appointments being available overall as each appointment requires a fixed timeslot and allocated time for cleaning between patients. This is part of the COVID-19 infection control procedures that are still in place for the NHS which also restrict how many people we can safely have in our waiting areas. The last thing we want is for people to be unsafe in our buildings when they are already coming to see us because they are unwell. By offering a telephone consultation first, we are able to triage and prioritise care. Where a face-to-face appointment is needed, we aim to bring the patient in as quickly as possible after the call to see the GP, often the same day. We have received some very helpful feedback from local councillors that the way the appointment system works is perhaps not well-understood and we are now working on a leaflet that will hopefully help make things clearer. We will involve our Patient Participation Group in approving this document to ensure that it meets the needs of patients.

We feel incredibly disappointed that local residents feel the need to protest against the NHS at a time when it is under such severe pressure. Setting the scene as a battleground between doctors and patients is distressing and destructive. Yes, there are problems. Yes, many of these are difficult to fix. But we are willing to talk and to come up with solutions together. Like practices across the country, we admit that we are struggling to cope. Our team is exhausted and has worked under immense stress for 18 months. We can clearly see the impact on the wellbeing of our staff and fear that they will choose to leave the profession. We are desperate for additional resources (staff and space), particularly for our reception and administrative teams, but recruitment is becoming increasingly difficult. When we put this alongside some of the highest staff sickness absence rates we have experienced since the start of the pandemic, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain services let alone extend them even further to cope with the increased demand.

That increased demand for access to general practice is coming from a number of different areas. We are dealing with the impact of 18 months of on/off COVID lockdowns and restrictions which have taken a severe toll on both physical and mental health. At the same time, we have patients suffering from COVID and long-COVID. And those for whom their treatment or operation in secondary care has been delayed and who now require substantial ongoing management in general practice to help cope with their pain and symptoms whilst they are waiting. We have a higher number of general infections circulating in the community now that we are all mixing again. We have all the catching up on things that we were instructed to suspend during 2020 such as smears and joint injections. These all involve patient consultations and they are all important.

We also have the seasonal work that must be accommodated. We have started flu vaccinations a month earlier than usual and with a plan to deliver them more quickly than ever. This is because we have been warned to expect an early and potentially hard flu season and want our community to be protected as early as possible. We also expect to shortly be commencing our part in a national COVID Booster programme. These are logistical challenges as our staff cannot be in two places at once.

Local healthcare is a priority for us. We intend to continue running services from all our current towns and villages - Withernsea, Hedon, Patrington, Roos and Keyingham. In response to feedback from patients, we are also looking to extend the normal opening hours of our smaller branch sites as soon as staffing levels permit. Where patients are offered an appointment at another location than their 'usual' surgery site, this is intended only to offer more choice and at times can mean the offer of an earlier appointment. We believe that this is the right thing to do if an alternative is available.

In relation to the specific challenges in Withernsea, coastal communities have suffered more than many other areas during recent times and there has recently been a report on this by the Chief Medical Officer. Sadly, many seaside practices throughout the country have struggled to recruit in recent years and some have been forced to close. We are working hard to fight this trend and have successfully recruited several GPs in these difficult times. The main reason for this is our commitment to training junior doctors which we have done for many years. Young GPs often enjoy working in Holderness, like the friendliness of the residents and are attracted to the variety of work here. Unfortunately, persistently negative social media has the power to undermine our recruitment efforts and is more likely to make young doctors think twice about whether this is a place that they want to build their life and career.

Access to healthcare is only a small part of what keeps us healthy. There are a host of other issues including transport, education, and employment opportunities that play a major part. We meet regularly with commissioners and politicians to lobby for further work on addressing these wider determinants of health in Holderness.

We would like to put to rest the rumour that Holderness Health has been bought by an individual or company. We are a traditional GP Partnership. All our staff including our Chief Executive and our Management Team are employed by the GP Partners. This is the same model of traditional general practice that has been in place since the founding of the National Health Service in 1948 and we are proud to continue the legacy of free and local general practice services which, despite the current challenges, are still some of the best in the world.

We have also heard the rising level of frustration with telephone waiting times and want to assure all our patients that we are not ignoring this. Because of the level of demand, call volumes are exceptionally high. We have done a significant piece of modelling work around this and are committed to employing more staff but despite several rounds of recruitment advertising, we have not managed to fill all the posts we have available. We are concerned that the negative and sometimes aggressive tone that has prevailed on social media may be deterring applicants from considering roles which provide secure and often rewarding employment.

Social media is a difficult forum in which to discuss complex issues. We are delighted that one of the organisers of the current campaign has agreed to meet with us to discuss her concerns in more detail. We make an open invitation to others who have similar concerns to come to us with them so that we can work together to find solutions. We welcome a conversation at any time.

Finally, we know from the many kind and encouraging comments we receive that there are a large number of patients who fully understand the challenges that the NHS is facing and want to see general practice given the support it needs nationally. Whilst they may not wish to be part of the social media debate, we hope that they will consider signing up to the British Medical Association's 'Support Your Surgery' campaign which is very quick and easy to do via the [BMA website](#).