

The 'askmyGP' online service

Is it working for you?

May 2021



Accessible Formats

This report is also available in Welsh.

If you would like this publication in an alternative format and/or language, please contact us.

You can download an electronic copy from our website:

<https://swanseabaychc.nhs.wales/>

Or ask for a copy by contacting our office. Contact details can be found on page 26.

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About Swansea Bay Community Health Council (CHC)

Swansea Bay CHC is the independent watchdog of the National Health Service (NHS) within Neath Port Talbot and Swansea. We encourage and support people to have a voice in the design and delivery of healthcare for their families and local communities.

Swansea Bay CHC works with the NHS, inspection and regulatory bodies. We provide an important link between those who plan and deliver NHS services, those who inspect and regulate it and those who use it.

We hear from the public in many different ways. Before the coronavirus pandemic, we regularly visited NHS services to hear from patients while they were receiving care and treatment. We spoke directly to their families and carers too. We also heard from people at local community events and by talking to community representatives and groups.

Since the coronavirus pandemic, we have needed to change the ways we engage the public and patients. This includes surveys, social media and videoconferencing using apps such as Zoom, Teams and Skype, to hear from people directly about their views and experiences of NHS services. Apps have made it possible to attend virtual engagement events too. We continue to hear from people through enquiries and our complaints advocacy service. Swansea Bay CHC represents the “patient and public” voice in Neath Port Talbot and Swansea.

Background and Introduction

In line with our Operational Plan 2020/21, we set out to collect feedback from people about their experiences of accessing services at their GP practice.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, we were unable to collect feedback as we would have before, by visiting GP practices to speak to patients in waiting rooms, visiting groups in the community and through attending engagement events. All face-to-face engagement and visiting activity was stopped and we needed to change our ways of working.

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, access to GP services changed for patients too, with practices no longer operating an “open door” policy. GP practices needed to protect patients and staff from the risks of infection.

One of the ways some patients could safely access GP services was using an online service called, ‘askmyGP’. We decided to speak to people about their experiences of the ‘askmyGP’ online system.

Prior to the pandemic, many GP practices across Neath Port Talbot and Swansea had added this system for patients to contact their practice. Those practices that are not using ‘askmyGP’ use a video conference system called ‘Attend Anywhere’.¹

¹ This report focuses only on the ‘askmyGP’ system

What is 'askmyGP'?

It is an online service whereby patients, parents and carers can use their smartphone, tablet or computer to seek help from a GP or other health-care professional.²

People without online access will not be able to directly access 'askmyGP'; however, patients can continue to contact their practice by telephone. The Health Board told us that telephone requests are dealt with in exactly the same way as the online requests.

How does 'askmyGP' work?

Using 'askmyGP', patients can contact their practice on the day they require advice. Patients can choose to receive a telephone call, face-to-face appointment, video or email response. Dependent on need, patients may be offered an appointment with a GP or healthcare professional. Many patients will however, avoid the need to make unnecessary visits to their surgery.

GP Practices and Clusters

Across Neath Port Talbot and Swansea there are 49 GP practices, within 8 Primary Care Clusters (Afan, Bay Health, City Health, Cwmtawe, Llwchwr, Neath, Penderi, Upper Valleys). A cluster is a group of GP surgeries working together to share services, expertise and pool resources for the local community.

² If a GP practice is using askmyGP, any patient registered at the practice will be able to use it, including parents, care homes and carers. Carers can register on the app to get access.

At the time of our survey, 'askmyGP' was live in 30 GP practices across Swansea Bay. At the time of writing our report, Swansea Bay Health Board provided the following update:

- 32 practices are using 'askmyGP'
- 145,000 patients have used the system to date
- nearly 40,000 patients use the service each month
- 704,000 requests had been generated in total
- around 17,000 requests are now being made each week

This report provides an overview of the feedback we received from 311 people about their experiences of the 'askmyGP' online service.

The feedback received highlights that peoples experiences of the system is mostly positive and the extra way of accessing GP services was welcome. Large amounts of feedback referred to the speed and convenience of the additional service offered to patients, with valuable time no longer being wasted waiting to get through to a receptionist by telephone.

However, the feedback did show differences in patient's appetite to use technology. Negative comments were mostly to do with difficulties locating the 'askmyGP' app on practice websites and concerns the system was widening the health inequality gap by making the access easier only for those who are computer literate.

Valuable feedback was also received from people with suggestions for how the 'askmyGP' service could be improved for patients, parents and carers.

A full list of our recommendations can be found on page 24.

The comments and views in this report do not represent the views of all GP practice patients across Swansea Bay who have used the 'askmyGP' online service.

What we did

During the winter of 2020, we asked people across the Swansea Bay area to share their views and experiences of the 'askmyGP' online service.

During the coronavirus pandemic, people have been able to share feedback with us by completing our local surveys online, or by contacting us by post, phone, email and website.

We reached out to people using social media, including Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, providing direct links to our online surveys.

We shared our engagement messages promoting the survey on social media and by email, with many local groups and stakeholders in an effort to reach as many people as possible, including:

- Council for Voluntary Service (Neath Port Talbot & Swansea)
- GP cluster networks
- Local Area Coordinators
- Swansea Bay University Health Board
- Local community groups, including Covid-19 support groups
- Seldom heard groups
- Local and national charities

We picked up feedback in other ways too, e.g., through our enquiries and complaints advocacy service, local community networks, community representatives and groups, and monitoring of health board activities, including feedback and complaints.

Who we are hearing from

Here is a snapshot of the people who shared their views and experiences with us through our local survey.

We heard from 311 people through our local survey

Over 99% shared their views and experiences in English

Almost three quarters were female (74.27%)

Around 89% were White (Welsh, English, Scottish, Northern Irish, British)

Age range categories:

Almost 33% were aged 45 – 60 years old

Around 30% were aged 60 – 75 years old

Almost 27% were aged 26 – 44 years old

Around 83% identified as heterosexual

Almost a quarter had a long-standing physical condition

Around 22% had a mental health condition

Around 14% had a long-standing illness

Almost 7% were deaf or had a severe hearing impairment

Around 2% were blind or partially sighted

Just under 1% had a learning disability

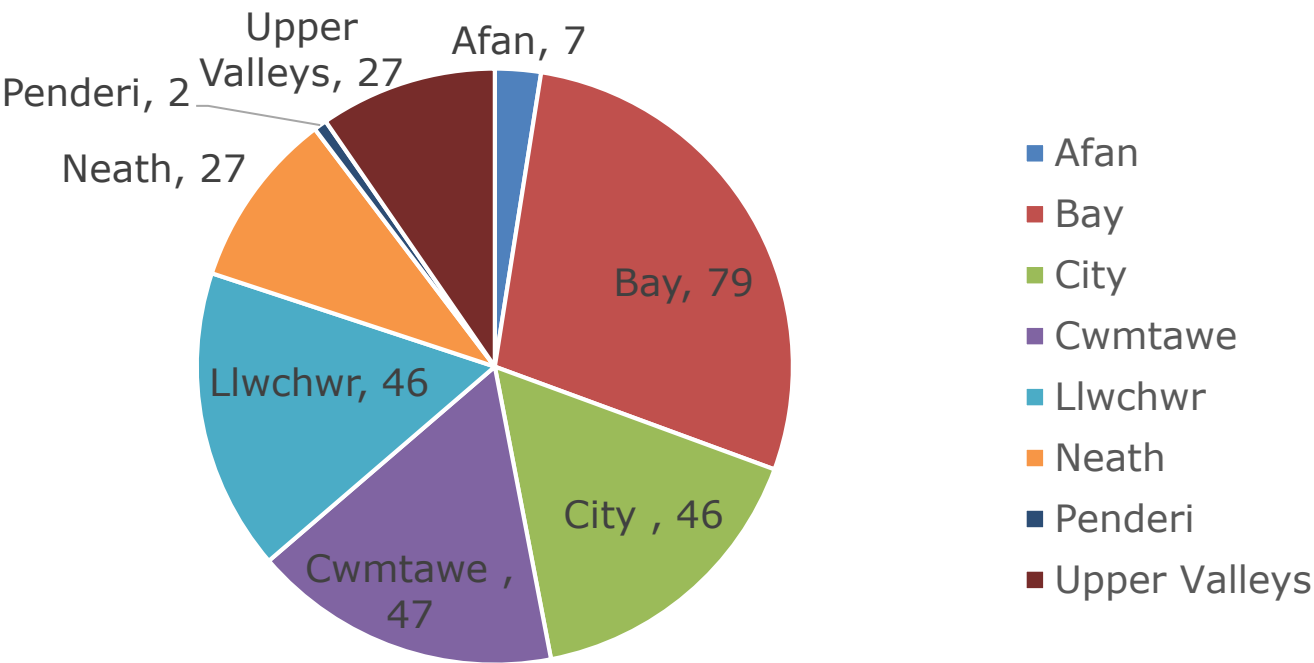
You can find out from our Equality Plan what we are doing to hear from different groups of people so that we can better represent the diversity of the communities we serve. You can find our Equality Plan on our website: www.swanseabaychc.nhs.wales/

What we heard

311 people shared their experience with us. 235 people were from the Swansea area and 73 from Neath and Port Talbot. 1 person lived in another Health Board area. The majority of people shared their own personal experience and 14 people responded on behalf of someone else.

Our survey asked people a number of questions about their experience of the askmyGP online service. A copy of our survey is available on request.

We heard from people across all 8 GP cluster areas. The pie chart below shows the breakdown of patients registered within each cluster area.



The majority of patients (86%) told us they had used the askmygp service “lots of times” or “a couple of times”. 30 patients told us they had used the service “once”. Where patients told us they had not used askmyGP, we asked them to tell us the reasons why. Patients told us that they either had not heard of it or they did not understand what they needed to do. A small number told us they would rather visit their practice in person.

We asked people to tell us how easy they found it to use askmyGP for the first time. 180 people told us they found it “very easy” to use, 86 found it “fairly easy to use”, 34 found it “hard” to use while 6 told us they “hadn’t tried” to use it.

How did you hear about the askmyGP online service?

The majority of people (85%) told us they heard about ‘askmyGP’ through their GP practice website (146) or through their GP practices’ telephone message (119). Other people heard through word of mouth, by seeing information on waiting room TV screens, through the NHS website or in a leaflet, online and social media. 2 people reported receiving text messages about the service from their practice.

We asked people to tell us whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements about their experiences of the askmyGP system. The key findings are set out on the next page.

Key Findings:

84% of patients agreed it was easy to use

88% of patients agreed it was a useful service

83% of patients liked the way it looked

63% thought it was accessible to people with disabilities

82% agreed they could use it quickly

87% said they knew where to find it

82% agreed their needs were met using it

87% agreed they were contacted in a reasonable period of time after using it

80% agreed their issue was resolved after using it

More than half (55%) agreed they needed further contact with a GP or a health professional after using it

83% agreed their experience using it was positive

More than 3 quarters of patients (78%) agreed they preferred using online consultation services to phoning their surgery

82% of patients agreed they would recommend 'askmyGP' to family, friends & other patients at their practice

The key findings above show more than 80% of people agreed with the majority of the statements and were pleased with the online service. However, many people felt that the service was not accessible to people with disabilities. People's additional feedback on page 18 supports this.

We invited people to share in more detail their views on the 'askmyGP' system. 237 people provided additional feedback. There was a mixture of feedback received, with the majority being positive. Feedback has been grouped into themes and summarised as follows:

Positive Feedback

Many people spoke highly of the 'askmyGP' service, with a large portion of the feedback referring to how quick and easy the service was.

"Easy to access and GP responded quickly. Much more efficient way to communicate"

"Easy to use & fast response time"

Improved access to GP Services

People told us they felt that the 'askmyGP' service was improving the speed of patient access and the ability of GPs to respond quickly.

"My surgery has embraced the change which has made their services much easier to access..."

"Easier to access medical advice when working full time"

"The GP contacts you particularly quickly & I believe this is a far better more accessible system"

"Would sometimes not be able to request my repeat prescription because of waiting times on phone or surgery not being open after work whereas, askmyGP makes it accessible and allows me to request scripts easily and when needed"

Convenience

Many people felt that the online service was very helpful, allowing them to carry on with their day. People told us they were grateful not to be waiting ages trying to get through to reception by phone or waiting at the practice.

"So much easier than waiting on the phone or sitting for hours in the surgery"

"Sometimes telephone lines to the GP in the morning are particularly busy & using this has been far more convenient"

"Did not have to waste time queuing on the phone. Can get on with life while you wait for them to contact"

Others told us they liked having the ability to send a query on 'askmyGP' when the practice had closed.

"Can send a message out of hours"

"Useful out of hours"

Meeting patient's needs

Some patients told us that the online way of accessing GP services worked best for them and their individual needs.

"Works well for my needs and would fully recommend this service"

"So easy to use, convenient, much easier than going down and sitting in a waiting room. Easier for me with my anxiety"

"It is a very good for people who have anxiety, with talking on the phone"

"I have found that my daughter who has Asperger's uses this service very well. Whereas before she would not even phone the doctor"

"Sometimes my anxiety gets in the way of being able to express myself and my needs. This way I can think about what I need and type it out clearly in my own time without the added stress of being restricted for time and often feeling rushed by the doctor. Also I like that I can choose which doctor I'd like to be seen by"

Prescription service

Some patients felt the service was a very easy way of ordering repeat prescriptions.

"It's a great service for ordering repeat prescriptions"

"Quick and easy to use especially if only for script"

"Would sometimes not be able to request my repeat prescription because of waiting times on phone or surgery not being open after work whereas askmygp makes it accessible and allows me to request scripts easily and when needed"

Patients were also happy with being able to upload photos quickly to help the doctor resolve their problem.

"I was able to upload a photo to save visiting the practice"

"Sent a photo in of the problem and got a telephone call explaining what I needed"

"Being able to attach things, like photos was really useful"

"I could also add photos which enabled diagnosis"

Negative Feedback

Whilst the majority of feedback received was positive, there were some common negative themes.

Difficulty registering to use service

Some people told us they found it difficult registering for 'askmyGP'.

"It took a few attempts to register on to it for some reason, also happened to others I know"

"It took several attempts to be able to register on it. I got no response from the practice"

"It was difficult to register as the link on NHS website did not work"

Service is often 'down'

Others told us about times when the service was not working for them.

"After various attempts, I have yet to get it to work. It is always "down". Usually end up having to speak to the surgery receptionist anyway, and she was exasperated by it too!"

"I spent ages trying to access it, only to find out later from the receptionist that the system had been down that morning. If you are not really computer literate, how would you know that. I wasted a lot of time"

"Times I've tried to use it there seemed to be glitches, my question didn't seem to go through, the service was 'down' so I ended up giving up on it and ringing"

No “slots” available

In addition to times when the service was not working, people told us they had received messages telling them that “slots” were not available or the service was “at capacity” for the day.

“There are never any slots available”

“The first time I used it I was told that my query wasn’t logged because there were no slots left”

“Most frustrating is that it’s often “at capacity for the day” by mid-morning so it cannot be used”

“It's a great service, WHEN you can get on it! Now everyone is using it, they shut it early and say they are at capacity”

Patient requests closed too early

Some patients were frustrated that their requests were closed too soon.

“Occasionally frustrated when thread closed when further contact was necessary”

“My second use was to request a sick paper (following bereavement), this was passed to a GP, but they just 'closed' the call and did not advise whether it had been completed. I still had to ring the surgery for an update”

“When it works, it works quite well, but it depends on the doctor you consult. Some are very thorough and will see you, others email you back but then close your question down. No waiting to check if you're finished”

Access issues for some groups

Many people felt that the 'askmyGP' service was not accessible for some groups in the local community, including those with disabilities, older people, those who cannot get online or who are not computer literate and those who speak other languages.

"It will undoubtedly be difficult for some to use (people with visual impairments, some older people etc)"

"I am aware that not everyone has access to information technology, especially the elderly"

"I do have concerns that patients without IT skills , generally the elderly and more vulnerable could be at a disadvantage as from my experience the emphasis is very much on telling patients that this is the way forward"

"The service is not accessible for some people whose first language is not English / Welsh or for people who are unable to read or write"

"Absolutely not ok for a lot of older people who don't understand this type of service well or people with visual disabilities or certain types of neurodiversity"

Pressure to use online services

A number of patients felt concerned when practice staff told them they needed to use 'askmyGP' to contact their practice, with some suggesting that this pressure was widening the health inequalities gap.

"....the surgery refuses to help on the phone (even if it's just a quick 5 second question) and insist I use askmyGP"

"I have autism. It's easier to phone or talk in person but I was repeatedly made to feel like a nuisance by reception and told to use the service"

"Told to use it by the surgery as the only way to interact with the surgery. Very difficult for my 89 year old mother who doesn't use the internet. Disempowering for her. Totally reliant on me now for interaction with the surgery"

"We were told by practice that this was the only way that we would be able to deal with the surgery"

"I was told over the phone that I had to use it if I wanted my question answered"

"Not everyone has internet access and have found during lockdown some older members of society without access to smart phones or internet have been neglected by the GPs as this process appears to be the preferred option for so they don't have to see patients"

GP Practice Website

Some people told us they felt their GP practice website was hard to find, was not user friendly or well set up.

"The practice website is unusable. The 'askmyGP' is covered with a list of options that don't work and bounce around and write over each other so that you can't even read what is in the list"

"It is not easy to find a link to my surgery website online as the NHS links take me to info about the surgery not to the website. Then the surgery website is not mobile friendly and has teeny, tiny text so I have to search for the right tab for 'askmyGP' "

"The main web page design is terrible and confusing"

Difficulty locating the 'askmyGP' app

Some people told us they had trouble finding the 'askmyGP' link on their GP practice website.

"I am very computer literate and struggled where to find it and how to access it"

"It is easy to use once you find the link - this is not an obvious path as I kept getting through to NHS site - it should be made clearer that access via the link requires you to find your practice webpage. My Mum failed to get the hang of it but she is 83 and had never used a pc"

"I struggled to find the link to access it on my surgery's home page"

How would you rate your experience of the 'askmyGP' service?

We were pleased to note that the majority of patients were happy with their experience of the 'askmyGP' service overall; 246 patients (79%) rated their experience as 'good, very good or excellent'. 22 patients (7%) rated their experience as 'fair', and 25 patients (8%) rated their experience as 'poor' or 'very poor'.

What would make your experience of the online service better?

141 people shared their views on what they felt could make the 'askmyGP' service better. We have summarised the feedback received as follows:

- 🕒 Roll it out to all GP practices
- 🕒 Improve patient awareness of the online service
- 🕒 Provide simple guidance on registering for the first time for patients and when using the service on behalf of a patient
- 🕒 Improve accessibility for some groups
 - Screen reader
 - BSL
- 🕒 Contact patients by their chosen method
- 🕒 Privacy concerns – make it clear to patients who is reading their requests
- 🕒 Improved signposting to 'askmyGP' on practice websites
- 🕒 Ability to choose time slots for calls backs
- 🕒 An app that can be downloaded to peoples' devices to make accessing 'askmyGP' quicker and easier
- 🕒 User friendly GP practice websites

- Ensure website is compatible on mobile phones
- ☺ Notifications on GP practice website when the service is “down”
- ☺ Further “drop-down” options for patients within ‘askmyGP’
 - A repeat prescription service
 - Results
 - Video

Learning from what we heard

From what we have heard from the majority of people who shared their experience with us, the 'askmyGP' online service is providing many benefits to patients, including:

Improved access to GP services:

- ⌚ Timely advice, information
- ⌚ Reduced waiting times
- ⌚ Convenience, such as speaking to a GP:
 - more quickly than before
 - without taking time off work
 - when it suited them without having to visit or call their practice
- ⌚ Support to people who prefer to access services online
 - Some patients that feel apprehensive about attending the surgery or talking on the phone e.g. social anxiety, found the online service less stressful

Improved patient experience:

- ⌚ High levels of satisfaction
- ⌚ Feel more at ease
- ⌚ Avoid queues on the telephone
- ⌚ Avoid the waiting room

There is also learning to be gained from the roll out of the 'askmyGP' online service, to make it work better for patients. We hope that Swansea Bay University Health Board will utilise local people's feedback in this report to improve the 'askmyGP' online service as identified by patients.

Recommendations

1. Provide patients with clear information about online services available and what is being done to make sure services are safe to ensure people feel confident to use them
2. Make the interface more user-friendly
3. Simplify the registration process for patients; provide patients with clear information and instructions about how to register for 'askmyGP'
 - a. Make this information available in Easy Read
4. Feedback shared with us identified that some patients need reassurance that online services are not intended to replace traditional ways of contacting their GP practice; they simply offer additional ways to contact them. Provide reassurance to patients that face to face and telephone reception services will remain available for patients who prefer these options
5. Practices may wish to involve their patient participation group - they may have some good ideas about how to engage with different patient groups and build acceptance of the new system
6. Some people told us they felt certain population groups unable to use the online system were disadvantaged and received an inferior service to those who used it, particularly so when some patients used 'askmyGP' to contact the practice out of hours. Provide reassurance to patients who continue to use conventional methods that their requests are dealt with fairly and equally and that priority is not given to those patients using online services

7. Take individual differences into account and involve patients in co-designing any systems being considered

Thank you

We thank everyone who took the time to share their views and experiences with us about the 'askmyGP' online service and for sharing their ideas to improve the service.

We would like to thank our partner organisations for sharing information and our questionnaire and for supporting us to access seldom heard groups.

We hope the feedback people have taken time to share influences online healthcare services for patients, to recognise and value what is working well – and take action where they need to as quickly as they can to make things better.

Feedback

Swansea Bay CHC would love to hear what you think about this publication, and any suggestions about how we could have improved it, so we can use this to make our future work better.

Contact details

	Swansea Bay Community Health Council First Floor Cimla Health & Social Care Centre Neath SA11 3SU
	Landline: 01639 683490 Mobile: 07970 682000
	swanseabay@waleschc.org.uk
	https://swanseabaychc.nhs.wales
	@SwanseaBayCHC
	@SwanseaBayCHC
	@SwanseaBayCHC

If you write to us in Welsh, we will answer in Welsh. This will not lead to a delay in responding to your correspondence.

We welcome telephone calls in Welsh.

**Swansea Bay
Community Health Council**