

To All Local Councillors (via Council Chief Executive offices)

7 September 2020

Dear Councillor

Throughout the pandemic, GPs and practice staff have worked hard to keep surgeries open. Our services look slightly different at the moment, helping us ensure the protection of patients and staff, but family doctors are still there supporting, caring for and protecting our patients.

GPs have been working on the frontline of the pandemic response, caring for patients safely in their own communities, in care homes and in Covid Centres. To do this effectively, we have been adhering to and implementing infection control measures. Many of our surgery buildings are too small to allow adequate social distancing, and crowded waiting rooms with potential Covid-19 positive patients meant that practices had to take early and decisive action to reduce the number of people able to openly walk into our premises. All GPs have put appropriate alternatives in place, offering telephone and video appointments where suitable. To keep footfall in our surgeries to a minimum in order to protect everyone, we only offer face-to-face consultations where necessary.

GP surgeries remained open throughout the entire pandemic and worked without closing across both Easter Bank Holidays. Over the last 6 months, GPs across Northern Ireland have carried out 14,000 video consultations. From April to August this year, GPs have dealt with more than 57,000 Covid-19 related enquiries and triaged or referred almost 12,000 patients to Covid Centres. Practices are still open now and are very busy. GPs and their teams have been working hard to better communicate the new working methods of practices during the pandemic.

We are keen to keep you updated on the current GP practice environment and encourage you to share these key messages with constituents and the wider population to ensure that patients know to contact their GP practice when they need health care and treatment. We want to make sure that patients know GP practices are open, but we are working differently. There are many healthcare professionals working within the GP team and the medical receptionists are trained by the GP to help navigate patients to the right person who can provide the necessary advice and treatment.

Here's a reminder of what patients should do to ensure the process of visiting or contacting their GP practice goes smoothly:

- 1) Ring in advance;
- 2) If there is a buzzer at the entrance, ring before entering;
- 3) Wear a mask if attending the surgery;
- 4) When having a phone consultation, find somewhere quiet where you can speak aloud and have a note of what you want to discuss in front of you
- 5) If you need a repeat prescription, some surgeries provide a separate phone number or an online ordering facility. Please check your own GP surgery's website for details and recognise that at the moment it might take slightly longer than usual for prescription requests to be completed.