

TOTAL TRIAGE IS COMING

CHANGES TO OUR SYSTEMS FROM WEDNESDAY 10 APRIL 2024

We know that sometimes our patients find our systems frustrating, so following extensive research, discussion and your feedback, we are making changes to the way you contact us and access your healthcare. This is a total triage system.

From 10 April 2024 we will be using an online form for all contacts with the Medical Centre which will include all GP/paramedic/nurse practitioner/clinical psychology appointment requests and all medical and administrative queries.

Background

Appointments in general practice have traditionally been booked on a first-come first-served basis, generally by being able to get through on the phone. Even before Covid, this system was under increased pressure as demand for general practice services and patient need and complexity has risen significantly in recent years, whilst funding and therefore staff numbers have not been able to increase to match that increase in demand. This has led to increased waiting times and delays for patients, and significant pressure on our staff and clinicians.

The overall impact of this situation is that, whilst both telephone and online requests are handled on a first-come first-served basis because some people can get through and others can't, those patients with a more urgent clinical need may often be unable to book an appointment or have to be seen as an 'extra' patient by GPs by being added to an already full clinic.

This system also placed pressure on Reception staff to meet patients' needs and find appointments where there weren't any available – leading to patients repeatedly being asked to call back the next day.

Patients were, and are, understandably unhappy and frustrated with this situation, as telephone delays and waiting times for appointments can grow. Covid both highlighted and exacerbated this with telephone triage being required for the majority of patients to reduce risk, but clearly this overwhelmed the telephone system even with every available member of staff answering calls. Post Covid, this overwhelming demand on the telephone systems, and hence on the appointment systems has continued and in fact increased. We therefore needed to look at ways to cope with this increased demand with the following objectives in mind: -

- To ensure all patients have the same opportunity to access services they may need from general practice, irrespective of the method used to contact the practice.
- To maximise the opportunities available using digital/online tools and access, whilst ensuring equitable access for all patients.
- To make the best possible use of our limited clinical resources, ensuring the most appropriate clinician sees the most appropriate patient.

- To ensure patients can receive an appropriate appointment with an appropriate health care professional at an appropriate time, or advice or signposting to appropriate services or support.
- To reduce pressure on staff and clinicians and ensure the service we can deliver is safe and sustainable.
- To improve staff recruitment and retention and reduce the risk of staff burnout.
- To improve the data quality around demand and resource usage, to enable us to plan services and workforce more effectively, and to also enable more informed conversations with patients and local and national commissioners about the pressures on general practice.
- To meet our NHS England contractual requirements to implement online access.

How will I access care?

There are two ways to access care:

- For those that have **access to the internet** we would ask that you go online and complete the **online form** on our website. This is the preferred method of contact as it will avoid long waits on the telephone but also free up the telephone lines for those patients whose need is urgent, as well as for patients who don't have access to, or are unable to use online systems.
- For those who are **unable to access the internet** please call the Medical Centre and a patient advisor will complete the online form with your assistance. (Please note that if you telephone the process will take longer). If you decide to attend in person, you will still be guided through the form by one of the team.

Whichever route you use, you will be asked a range of questions to help our Triage Team assess and direct your request to the best place to meet your needs.

Your request will be handled in exactly the same manner whether you complete the form online yourself, contact us via telephone, or attend in person, where our patient advisors complete the form with you by asking exactly the same questions as the online system. This ensures equity of access for all patients.

How does the online form work?

At the heart of our new system is **Klinik**. Klinik is one of a number of systems approved by the NHS to improve digital/online access to general practice and to ensure right person/right time/right place care for patients and meet our contractual requirements.

- From a patient perspective, Klinik is primarily a tool for entering information about your need for an appointment or other help. Klinik will help us to manage demand and ensure that we can triage more effectively.
- In our current system, telephone requests are managed by our patient advisors, often after some delay in being connected, who try to find an appointment on a first-come first-served basis.

Our patient advisors always do the best they can to help patients, and have a wealth of knowledge and experience, but they are not clinically trained and are often placed in the difficult position of trying to find appointments when none are available or having to escalate urgent requests to clinicians who already have a full clinic booked, putting them under increased pressure to see an unsafe number of patients.

As demand has increased over the years, the appointment numbers we are safely able to provide with current levels of funding and staff availability has been unable to match this increasing demand. Implementing a more effective clinical triage process is therefore essential to improve patient safety and make the most appropriate use of appointments.

- **All** patient requests will now be entered into the online system. Patients or their representative/carer, should enter their requests via the form on our website, <https://www.launcestonmedicalcentre.co.uk/> look for the blue banner 'contact us online' which saves time queuing on the telephone, or for those who are unable to use the online system our staff will enter details on the patient's behalf, either via telephone (or in person if you are unable to use a phone or computer).
- The system asks structured questions about your request. Whilst this can feel intrusive or unnecessary to some, it is vitally important as this information is used by our Triage Team to assess the urgency of your request. Without accurate information, we cannot assess your need. If necessary, we will contact you for more information, but the system will ask all appropriate questions and allow you to enter relevant details.
- The Triage Team is made up of a combination of staff using their combined skills and experience to assess the information you have provided and ensure (if necessary) you are offered an appointment in an appropriate timescale and with the most appropriate clinician available. Administrative support in the team will then contact you to book any necessary appointment. You may be contacted by text message or email if you require advice or signposting to further help and support rather than an appointment.
- General Practice (Primary Care) has changed over time, and especially during, and post Covid, new ways or working became embedded. There are now many more highly skilled individuals who work in our teams apart from just GPs and Nurses. The Triage Team may recommend that your need is best addressed by another member of the extended team for example a first contact physiotherapist/musculoskeletal practitioner, a paramedic practitioner, nurse practitioner or minor illness nurse, the practice clinical pharmacist or indeed a community pharmacist who can now manage a range of conditions in the community.

Whilst we would very much like to be in a position to offer every patient exactly what they have asked for, the reality is that we do not have the staff or resources to be able to do this. As a result, we must assess your request according to clinical need and find the best possible option under the circumstances. Rest assured our primary aim will always be to ensure that, where necessary, the right patient is seen by the right person at the right time, or you are provided with appropriate advice or signposting to the help or support your need.

SOME FAQs

Q: What if I don't want to disclose personal information on the phone/before an appointment?

A: We recognise that patient privacy is important and that some patients may not feel comfortable disclosing personal information to administrative staff; however, our teams work under strict confidentiality policies. For those who can do so, we strongly encourage patients to submit a request online. Your details are automatically passed to the Triage Team to review directly.

If you cannot use the online service, please give as much information as you can to the patient advisor going through the form with you so that the Triage Team can assess the urgency of your need alongside those who have completed their own request online. Our staff are used to helping hundreds of people a day and treat your information in absolute confidence. Lack of, or no information provided may delay the process for you as the Triage Team will not be able to assess your need or priority.

Q: If I need to telephone, will my request be triaged after someone who sends in a request online?

A: No – all requests by telephone will still require information to be added to a request form, which the patient advisor will help with - although this will take longer than completing it yourself online. All requests received are then triaged according to clinical urgency, not the time or the way in which they were submitted. The system automatically flags up certain symptoms or conditions to our Triage Team, so if your need is more urgent than someone else, you will be prioritised.

Q: Why can't I just book an appointment immediately if I telephone?

A: As we are sure you already appreciate appointment capacity is limited and if we allow every patient to book without clinically triaging need, then patients with more clinically urgent needs may not be seen in an appropriate timescale. Whilst this may mean you might have to wait slightly longer to find out when your appointment will be, or what help or advice you may need, the overall impact is that you are likely to be seen (if necessary) sooner than under our old system, especially if your need is acute.

Q: When will I be contacted once I have submitted an online request?

A: We will aim to review all requests received via the online system the same day and aim to respond within 24-48 hours depending on medical need. You may be contacted by text, email or telephone.

We appreciate that change is difficult which is why we have set out in detail why we are making these changes to our systems. We hope that they will help everyone, however any new system always takes time to settle in and there will inevitably be issues unforeseen which arise and will need addressing along the way. Please bear with us as we make these changes as we hope, and experience of others has taught us, that the outcome will be of benefit to us all.