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Dear *Karen*,

Thank you for your letter of 25 September 2020 outlining the concerns of Council members around the lack of access to face to face consultations with GPs for residents in the Council area at the present time.

At the outset I want to stress that GP practices are open and GPs are providing face-to-face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them. All practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to allow them to do so safely.

It may also be helpful if I explain that, as independent contractors who contract with the Health and Social Care Board to provide primary medical services, GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients and the current COVID-19 pandemic does not in any way negate this requirement.

GP practices are currently operating a telephone first triage system which allows patients to continue to seek medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP then uses their clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be safely managed over the telephone or whether a face to face appointment is required. Some practices have also utilised other technologies such as video conferencing and allowing patients to send photographs by text to facilitate diagnosis of for example a skin rash. This ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential.

The telephone first triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face to face assessment to one of the Primary Care COVID-19 Centres which have been established in Northern Ireland. This ensures that these patients do not attend the GP Practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment.

GPs are also still expected to clinically assess for risk of serious illness and refer as clinically appropriate for diagnostic tests and to specialist services, such as an outpatient clinic, as they have always done.

As you can appreciate, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges for the planning and delivery of health and social care services in Northern Ireland. General practice has rapidly changed its working patterns in order to cope with the current national emergency. Some of the measures taken are to reduce the risk of COVID-19

spread by providing advice by telephone or video where appropriate. Other decisions are based on the potential impact of COVID-19 on conditions, or the potential impact of treatments on the risk of contracting COVID-19.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices on 30 July 2020 to ask that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices have been advised to communicate to patients (on posters, practice website, or practice newsletter) about the practice services that are available and how to access them and to ensure that this information is made clear to patients.

On 7 September, GP leaders from the Health and Social Care Board, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association issued a statement to reassure patients that whilst patients may be seen in a different way, by phone or video-link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and issue prescriptions.

The statement can be viewed here: <http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/new-ways-working-gp-practices-still-open-protecting-caring/>

You will also have received a copy of a letter that was issued to MLAs and other local political representatives providing an update on the current arrangements and asking that they share the key message with constituents that GP practices are open, but working differently.

As you will be aware, a Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services was published by my Department on 9 June 2020. The Framework recognises the impact of COVID-19 on the Health and Social Care system and that this will be both profound and long lasting, including on how, and the extent to which, services are delivered.

I appreciate the professional and flexible response of all our health and social care workforce and independent care providers to the challenges of COVID-19. As we move forward to rebuild the HSC to meet the needs of our community, it is recognised that care will need to be delivered differently, with greater collaboration across care sectors to better deliver services and protect both patients and staff and to build on the improvements in communication and co-operation between all care sectors which have been seen during the COVID-19 response.

However if any of your Council residents wish to raise a formal complaint about the service they have received from their GP, this should be raised with the GP practice itself in the first instance. All practices are required to have a complaints procedure to address any issues raised by patients.

Alternatively, the Complaints Team in the Health and Social Care Board can act as an intermediary between a patient and the practice. The Board's Complaints Officer can be contacted for further advice and assistance, by telephoning 028 9536 3893, or calling in person or writing to the Complaints Department, Health and Social Care Board, 12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.

Independent advice and support on making a complaint about health and social care services is also available from the Patient and Client Council, who offer a free, confidential, patient advocacy service. The Patient and Client Council can be contacted by Freephone on 0800 917 0222, by email at info.pcc@hscni.net or by writing to Patient and Client Council, 9th Floor, BT Riverside Tower, 5 Lanyon Place, Belfast, BT1 3BT.

If, following a response to any complaint, the patient remains unhappy they can bring their complaint to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman. The Ombudsman can be contacted at: Progressive House, 33 Wellington Place, Belfast BT1 6HN, Freepost NIPSO, Freephone 0800 343424, or by email at nipso@nipso.org.uk.

I hope you find this helpful.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robin Swann', is positioned above the printed name.

Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health

