

Case Study: Improving communication, reducing avoidable demand, and strengthening patient access

System: Cricketfield Surgery

Location: Newton Abbot

Practice Size: 10,300 registered patients

Additional Information: Serves a diverse population, with varying levels of digital confidence, health literacy, and access to online services.

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OVERVIEW

Cricketfield Surgery, based in Newton Abbot, provides care for over 10,300 patients. The practice serves a diverse population, with varying levels of digital confidence, health literacy, and access to online services.

Ensuring equitable access was a key consideration throughout, particularly for older patients and those less comfortable using digital tools. Phone and face to face access remained essential alongside any digital improvements to ensure patients could engage in ways that worked for them.

When the practice manager took up post in May 2025, the surgery was already managing significant operational pressures. A substantial amount of stabilisation work had already begun before engaging with the Practice Level Support programme.

The value of the programme was in creating the space to step back, benchmark progress more clearly, and build on existing work in a more structured and evidence based way.

At the time, communication sat alongside wider operational responsibilities. There was a growing sense that the way information was shared with patients and across the team was no longer working as well as it needed to.

THE CHALLENGE

Communication across the practice was largely reactive, with reception acting as the main point of contact for most patient queries.

This led to:

- High volumes of repeat and avoidable queries
- Inconsistent messaging across the team

- An over reliance on phone contact
- Limited visibility for patients on how to access care

Patients often contacted the practice to ask:

- How to get an appointment
- Who they should contact
- How to order prescriptions

As demand increased, pressure on reception teams grew. During peak periods, confidence could dip and messaging became less consistent, creating further confusion for patients.

The impact was felt across the practice:

- Patients felt uncertain and frustrated
- Reception teams were under sustained pressure
- Administrative processes became less efficient
- Clinical time was affected by avoidable follow up work

The challenge was not caused by one single issue. Instead, it reflected the cumulative pressure of rising demand, increasing patient expectations, digital access changes, and operational workload.

OUR APPROACH

Cricketfield Surgery worked with Xytal to review ways of working, with hands on facilitation and practical support provided alongside the team.

The focus was not on introducing new tools alone, but on creating the space to properly understand demand, processes, patient behaviour, operational pressure points, and communication challenges.

Through structured support and regular on-site facilitation, the team:

- Reviewed data and challenged assumptions
- Identified where demand was avoidable
- Benchmarked website usability, communication, and access routes
- Mapped the patient journey to better understand pressure points and inconsistencies
- Prioritised realistic, practical changes

Xytal's approach combined guidance with implementation support. Weekly sessions meant changes could be worked through in real time, helping the team stay focused and maintain momentum.

The support also helped the team step back from day to day pressures and take a more reflective approach to improvement work.

“You have given us a much needed ‘slow down and think about it’ approach, whereas I used to use a much more ‘tick things off on a list’ approach.” Practice Manager

Clear principles guided the work:

- Communication should be clear
- Messaging should be consistent
- Information should be easy to access

WHAT CHANGED IN PRACTICE

i. Focusing on high impact areas

The team started by addressing the most common and repetitive patient queries. Work was phased to allow both staff and patients to adapt.

ii. Improving digital access and the website

The practice redesigned its website to make it easier for patients to understand how to access care and services.

This included:

- Removing jargon and simplifying language
- Improving navigation and structure
- Redesigning key pages such as prescriptions and appointments
- Creating a resource library
- Introducing an interactive tool “supporting you to access the right care” to guide patients to the right care

One early change, improving the prescriptions page, led to a noticeable reduction in related queries.

iii. Strengthening communication within the practice

Communication across the surgery was made more visible and consistent.

Changes included:

- Updated waiting room boards
- Improved TV screen messaging
- Clearer internal communication
- A “You said, we did” board
- Regular feedback updates

Patients began arriving at reception better informed, supporting more focused and efficient conversations.

iv. Using social media to build connection

Social media became an important channel for sharing updates, reinforcing messages, and building a sense of community.

The practice:

- Shared over 125 posts
- Reached more than 95,000 views
- Generated over 1,400 interactions

Content that reflected the practice, its staff, and real updates proved most effective. Over time, the approach shifted towards fewer, higher quality posts.

v. Using data to guide decisions

The team used a combination of phone data, website analytics, social media insights, and patient feedback to track progress.

A key insight was that while website traffic did not significantly increase, usage became more effective. Patients were finding what they needed and completing requests without needing to call.

RESULTS

Alongside a clear reduction in demand, the practice saw a wider shift in how patients accessed care. Key outcomes included:

Reduced number of incoming calls:

Weekly incoming calls reduced from over 1,000 calls per week at baseline to 772 at follow up, representing a significant reduction in incoming phone demand.

The practice began seeing noticeable improvements within two to three months, with changes continuing to build overtime.

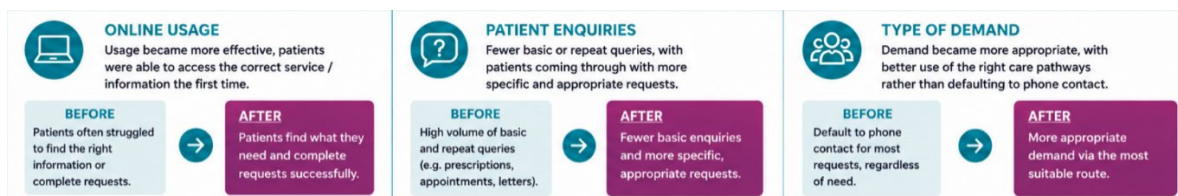
| Measure | Baseline Range | Follow Up |
|--|----------------|-----------|
| Weekly incoming calls | 939 to 1,010 | 772 |
| Clinical online consultation submissions | 42 to 451 | 434 |
| Administrative online consultation submissions | 97 to 574 | 538 |

Data reflects changes following operational and communication improvements.



A shift in demand and access:

- Fewer repeat and avoidable queries, particularly for prescriptions and administrative requests
- More appropriate use of care pathways
- Better signposting and patient understanding
- Reduced reliance on the phone as the default contact method



More effective use of digital tools:

| Period | Total Clinical OC Submissions | Total Administrative OC Submissions | Total Clinical and Administrative OC Submissions |
|-----------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Week 1 | 53 | 44 | 97 |
| Follow Up | 434 | 104 | 538 |

- **454.6% increase** in completion of online forms and requests
- Patients accessing the correct information or service first time
- Digital usage becoming more effective rather than simply increasing

Operational improvements:

- Improved follow up management processes

- Reduction in follow-up waiting lists from nearly **300 patients to around 100**
- Structured review of frequent attenders
- Introduction of pre-appointment questionnaires
- Better routing of medication and cholesterol queries to pharmacists where appropriate
- Reduction in repeat prescribing routes and paper prescription requests
- Improved task management processes through rationalisation of task types

HOW THIS SUPPORTED THE PRACTICE:

- An estimated **16 hours of clinical capacity released** through reduction of follow up waiting lists
- Approximately **1 hour and 40 minutes of nursing capacity released** each week through the introduction of pre appointment questionnaires
- Redirected medication and cholesterol queries to pharmacists, **reducing use of GP appointment time**
- **Time saved** due to follow-up management – fewer patients were held on an internal waiting list, reducing administrative handling linked to booking, checking, chasing and rebooking follow-up activity.

WHAT THIS HAS MEANT FOR PATIENTS AND STAFF

FOR PATIENTS:

- Clearer understanding of how to access care
- Increased confidence navigating services
- Greater awareness of available support
- Feel more engaged with the practice and wider community

Patients became more informed and more willing to use the most appropriate route to access care.

One patient shared:

“I really enjoy the surgery’s posts... they make me feel part of the Cricketfield community.”

FOR STAFF:

- Reduced pressure on reception teams
- More consistent communication across the practice

- Improved confidence in conversations with patients
- Better use of clinical and administrative time

The overall feel of the practice changed. It remained busy, but felt more controlled, calmer, and safer.

REFLECTIONS

One of the strongest outcomes for the team was the sense of making a meaningful difference to how the practice operates day to day.

The work demonstrated that relatively small but well coordinated changes could create significant operational impact when supported by consistent facilitation, reflection, and engagement.

Key lessons **included**:

- Clear and consistent communication reduces avoidable demand
- Patients engage more positively when they understand how services work
- Improvement work is more sustainable when teams are actively involved in shaping it

“I also really enjoy seeing positive posts about the staff, it helps to see them as 'real people' and not just names behind a door or screen!”

NEXT STEPS

The practice is now focused on building a more strategic approach to communication.

Priorities include:

- Expanding proactive health and preventative messaging
 - Improving digital accessibility
 - Continuing to strengthen patient engagement
 - Developing more practice-lead content, including video
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THE ROLE OF XYTAL

Xytal worked alongside Cricketfield Surgery as a facilitator and delivery partner, supporting the team to review and improve ways of working.

Support included:

- Structured diagnostics and reflection
- On site facilitation and coaching
- Practical implementation support

- Ongoing guidance to sustain change

This enabled the practice to move from reacting to demand, to actively shaping how patients access care and how the team works together.

Interested in accelerating transformation at your practice?

Contact Xytal to learn how we can help you unlock efficiency, innovation, and measurable results.