



Navigating Digital Health: Online GP Services and Bookings

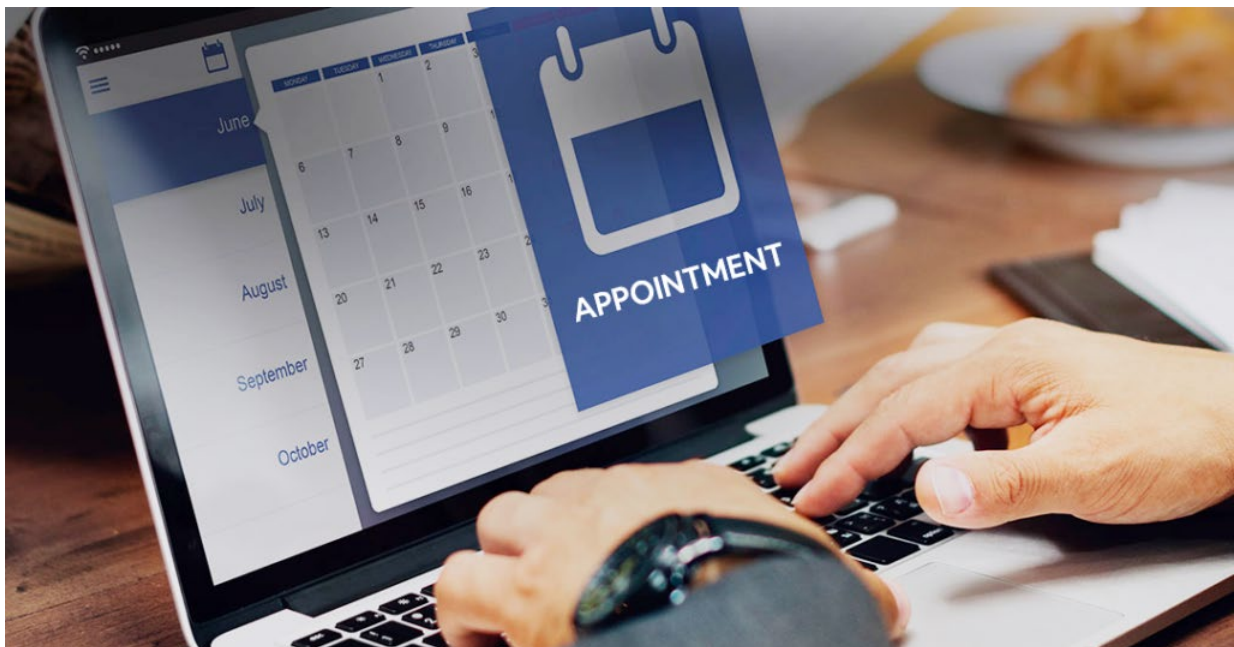
West Essex
August – October 2024

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Navigating Digital Health:

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Produced by Healthwatch Essex
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Contents

1.0 Introduction	3
1.1 Healthwatch Essex	3
1.2 Topic Background	3
1.3 Acknowledgements	4
1.4 Disclaimer	4
2.0 Purpose	5
2.1 Engagement methods	5
2.2 The Survey	6
2.3 Interviews and Conversation	29
3.0 Key Findings and Recommendations	34
4.0 Conclusion	36
5.0 Terminology and Acronyms	37

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Healthwatch Essex

Healthwatch Essex is an independent charity, gathering the lived experiences of people across Essex and representing their views about health and social care services. Our aim is to work with and influence decision makers so that gaps in services are recognised and best practice is shared, ensuring services are fit for purpose, effective and accessible, ultimately improving the health and wellbeing of our local population.

One of the functions of a local Healthwatch under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, is the provision of an advice and information service to the public about accessing, understanding, and navigating health and social care services and their choices in relation to aspects of those services. This document was revised in July 2022 and the role of Healthwatch was further strengthened as a voice of the public with a role in ensuring lived experience was heard at the highest level.

The Healthwatch Essex Information and Guidance team are dedicated to capturing the health and social care experiences people in Essex are encountering daily. The team respond to enquiries relating to health and social care and are equipped through training, to offer specific information to the public or other professionals. The team are well placed to listen, reflect on and support people to share difficult experiences such as the one's shared in this report.

1.2 Topic Background

The NHS England (NHSE) framework for action on digital inclusion identifies five key domains:

- Access to devices and data so that everyone can access digital healthcare if they choose to and experience the benefits
- Accessibility and ease of using technology, so that user-centred digital content and products are co-designed and deliver excellent patient outcomes
- Skills and capability so that everyone has the skills to use digital approaches and health services respond to the capabilities of all
- Beliefs and trust so that people understand and feel confident using digital health approaches
- Leadership and partnerships so that digital inclusion efforts are co-ordinated and help to reduce health inequalities.

The bullets above clearly require both local and national input and a highly coordinated campaign involving multiple stakeholders, partners and suppliers.

Therefore, it's important that HWE ICB is able to draw on the thoughts, experiences and wishes of its local population as a key component of the ongoing roll-out of digital services.

The 2023 NHSE national GP Survey highlighted that the percentage of patients who rated their overall experience of making an appointment as good was 54.4% (down from 56.2% in 2022).

Of those that tried, only half said it was easy to get through to their practice by phone, down approximately three percentage points from 2022.

The 8.00am scramble continues to feel like a lottery and a significant barrier, especially for people who do not have time to wait in the telephone queue.

At the same time, the general trend for online engagement continues to rise, with over 60% trying to use their GP practice website to access information or services.

1.3 Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Essex would like to thank the many people who engaged with us, participated in this project, and completed the survey.

Our thanks are also made to those individuals who took the time to speak with us and share their personal stories.

We would additionally like to thank our many partners, contacts, and networks who worked with us to share the project and survey throughout West Essex and help generate such a strong level of interest and feedback.

1.4 Disclaimer

Please note that this report relates to findings and observations carried out on specific dates and times, representing the views of those who contributed anonymously during the engagement period. This report summarises themes from the responses collected and puts forward recommendations based on the experiences shared with Healthwatch Essex during this time.

2.0 Purpose

The NHSE figures outlined in the topic background above, highlight the significant role there is for primary care access, services and general engagement online.

There is clearly an appetite for digital but, for example, currently less than 1% of respondents to the NHSE survey have spoken to someone by video call.

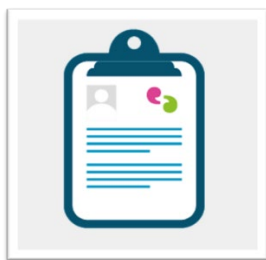
Using lived experience feedback ensures that investment, developments, and service roll-outs, can be as effective as possible and targeted to ensure they have maximum impact in the areas most needed, ensuring fair and equitable access for all, and reducing the burden on more traditional means of appointment making and consultation.

2.1 Engagement methods

Participants were contacted through the Healthwatch Essex website, through local West Essex based Facebook groups, the Healthwatch Essex newsletters, our own Facebook page, Instagram account and Tik-Tok. Word of mouth also played an important role along with promotion of the project via our extensive networks. This was of course in tandem with our extensive outreach programme facilitating the opportunity to speak with people face to face in a variety of different locations.

Our partners, other organisations and working groups in West Essex, together with our volunteers and many individuals inside and outside of the NHS and ECC helped and supported our efforts to engage with and reach as many people throughout the area as possible, including the opportunity to speak with people at The Latton Bush Centre, twice at St. Margaret's Hospital, and in Nazeing.

Participants were engaged with in three ways:



Survey

A survey was created to gain perspective and insight from residents. It was designed to provide statistical evidence, but also allowed participants to elaborate on their answers to a number of the questions.



Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted to collect personal stories from members of the public. Interviews took place by telephone during September and October 2024. Participants were willing for their experiences to be shared within this report, however, to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality of information they provided, all names used are pseudonyms to protect identities.



Group and Individual Discussion

Particular thanks to Epping Forest District Council's Community Champions who invited us to meet and chat to local community members, and to St. Margarets Hospital for allowing us to set up our information stand.

2.2 The Survey

The survey had a series of core multiple choice questions, together with some supplementary questions asking for more detail about why they selected what they did, mixed with a number of free text questions. There were some additional demographic questions to finish.

The survey was primarily in an online format but was also available to be printed off and filled out manually as required. The Information and Guidance Team at Healthwatch Essex were also available if the survey needed to be completed in any other format, such as over the telephone. The questions, and responses received, were as follows:

Question 1

What's the name of the GP practice you are registered with?

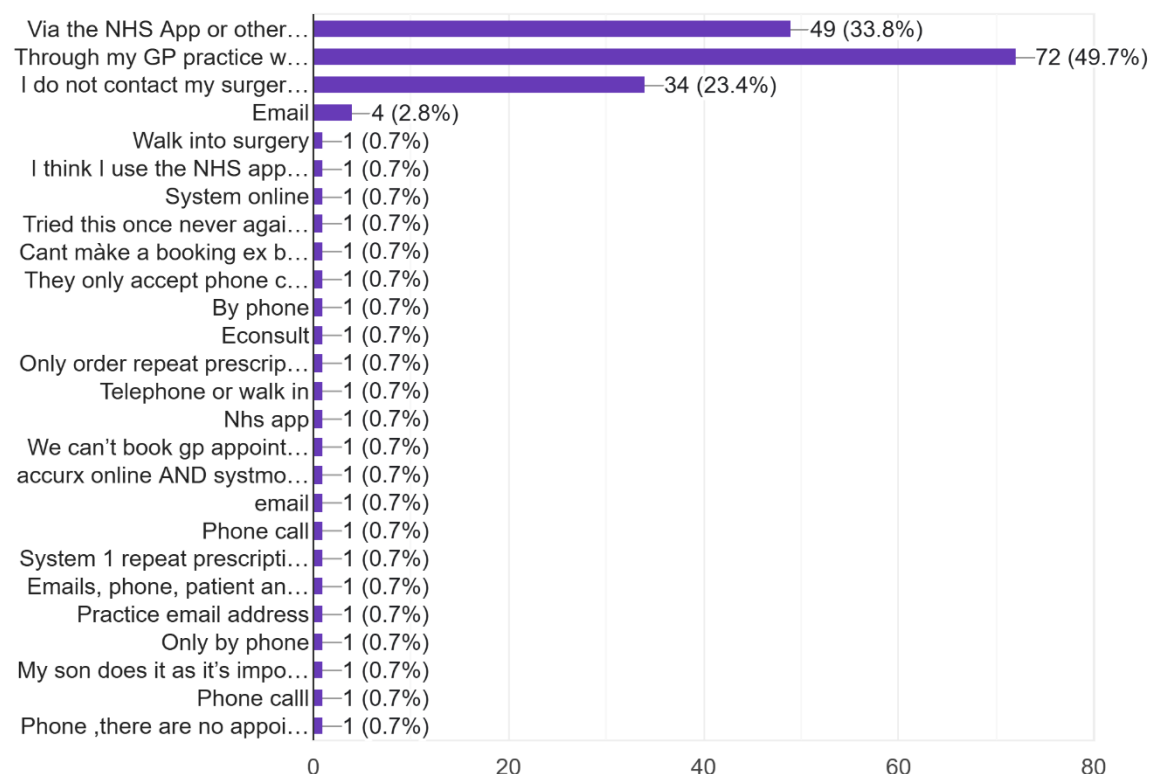
There were 27 different surgeries listed across the whole of West Essex, as well as some more from just over the county border in Hertfordshire which I have retained for the statistical elements of the report.

Question 2

How do you contact your GP practice online?

How do you contact your GP practice online? Please tick all the options that apply.

145 responses



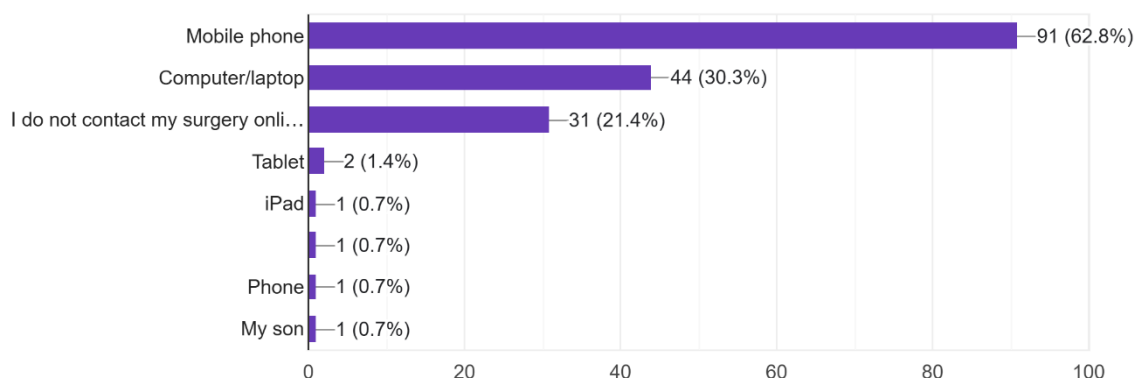
Using an App or the GP website accounts for two-thirds (67%) of our respondents, while 18% do not contact their surgery online, either through choice, inability, or they are unaware it's an option.

Question 3

What device(s) do you use to contact your GP Practice online?

What device do you use to contact your GP Practice online? Please tick all the options that apply.

145 responses

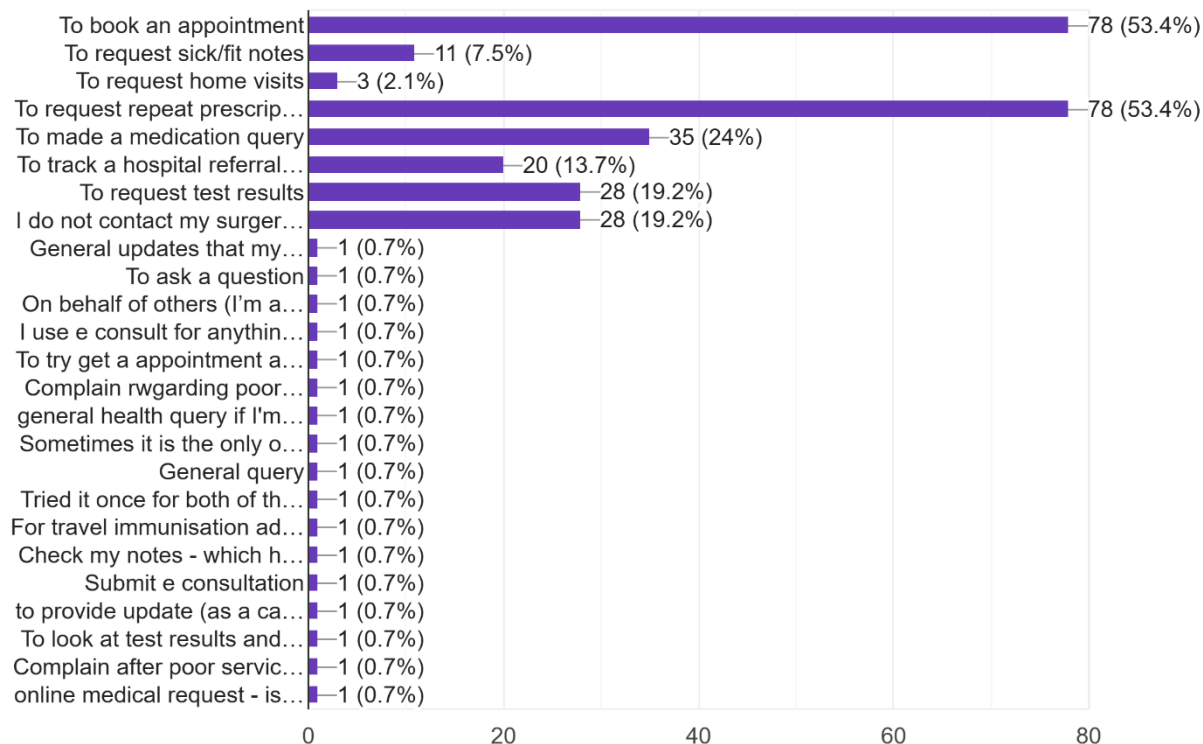


Question 4

Why do you contact your GP surgery online?

Why do you contact your GP surgery online? Please tick all the options that apply.

146 responses

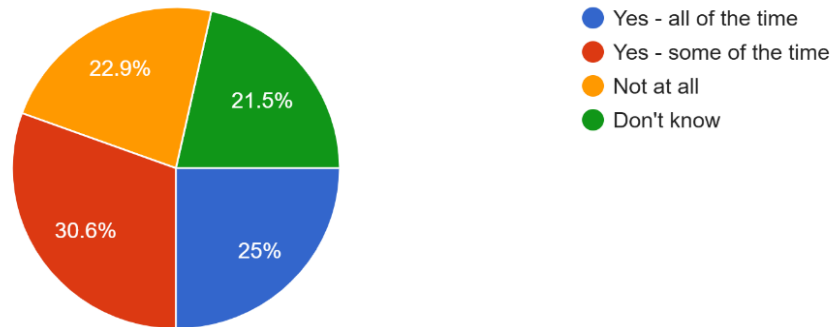


Question 5

Does your practice allow you to submit a medical query or consultation online?

Does your practice allow you to submit a medical query or consultation online?

144 responses

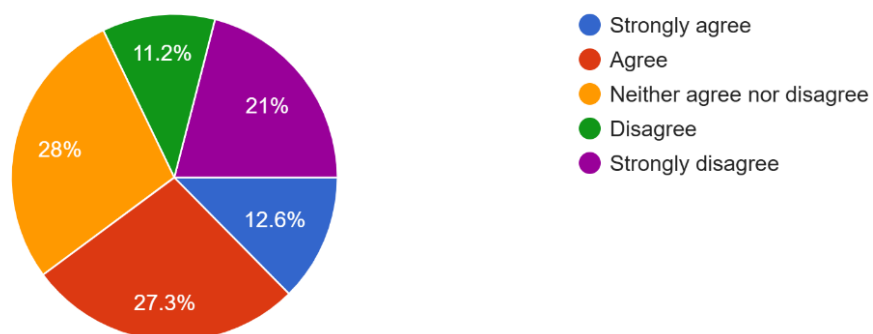


Question 6

Do you agree? If you would like to contact your surgery online, the online questions are easy to complete.

If you would like to contact your surgery online, the online questions are easy to complete.

143 responses

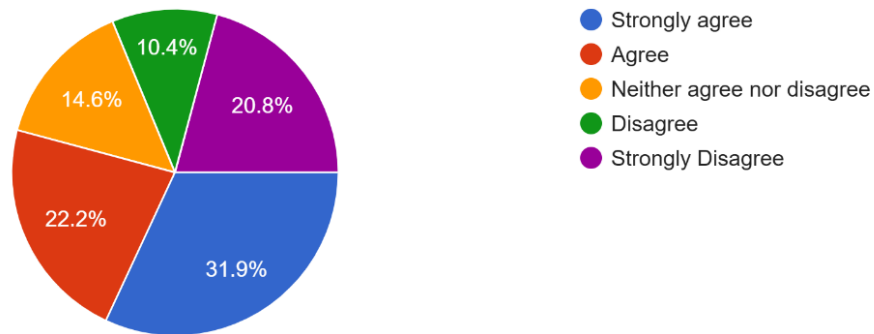


Question 7

Do you agree? Being able to contact my GP surgery online saves a long wait on the phone at 8am and allows me to contact the surgery at a time convenient for me.

Being able to contact my GP surgery online saves a long wait on the phone at 8am and allows me to contact the surgery at a time convenient for me.

144 responses



Question 8

Are there other things you would like to contact your GP surgery about online?

This provided an open text box for responses. A representative sample are posted below:

'I would like an email address so that I'm not constrained to only 500 characters.'

'I'd like a facility to make a general query or send info in - for instance blood pressure readings.'

'Book routine appointments.'

'Getting copies of hospital letters.'

'To correspond directly with a doctor and receive a response.'

'Urgent appointments. I still have to phone at 8am to try and get appointment.'

'I don't trust someone will respond. I would rather speak to a person.'

'No not really, as they can't operate the system effectively and you never get what you ask for anyway.'

'Booking appointment. Can only book by phone.'

‘Queries.’

‘My test results.’

‘Vaccinations.’

‘No, I'd rather use the phone and speak to a human.’

‘Public health information.’

‘I would like to be able to book a face-to-face appointment. All are just via telephone.’

‘There was supposedly a system for booking appointments online which would have been great, but they seem to have taken it down. It is not possible to get through by phone, so in order to contact them I have to take holiday from work and go in person.’

‘Booking appointments - this was in place before covid but now have to book on the telephone.’

‘No. I want to talk to a human.’

‘I would like the option to present a free text query. The website has this facility, but the surgery has not enabled it.’

‘It has made a bad system worse. There is no way to complete the online form after 8:30am when the capacity for the day has been reached, and if you are asking for test results or a routine appointment you get sent a link which never has any appointments available. It took three months and many complaints to finally get some test results. The receptionists would say everything has to be completed online, the online team said that I need to click a link which expires after seven days, and in those seven days there wasn't ever any appointments available. After three months of doing this, I had to complain to the CQC and management to get the results, and even then, the appointment was booked on the wrong day, and I had to complain again. The whole system should be scrapped. It has made the already difficult and daunting task of trying to get an appointment with a GP much, much harder.’

‘Make appointments.’

‘Test result. Appointments.’

‘Online appointment option.’

‘Changes to the appointments sent through.’

‘Lots. If only it wasn't so difficult to access. A 12-digit code is not very helpful.’

‘My surgery does not have online processes.’

‘Everything rather than waiting on the phone trying to get through.’

‘No, but the process needs to be quicker. Repeated questions and Covid questions, it can take ten minutes just to request a call about your blood test results so most of the questions are not related but still have to be filled in.’

‘To highlight issues and improvements.’

‘Yes, to request test results are sent to hospitals, to query medication and to request a change in medication.’

‘Yes, to book appointments but my App does not have that option available. I also use Systmonline, which I access via my laptop, and this seems to work better than the App.’

‘Home visits are not available online. More online appointments for face to face with a registered GP.’

‘Asking for medication which is not on repeat prescription and asking questions on medication I am taking.’

‘When I am eligible for routine health checks.’

‘Appointments with various services that my practice provides like dietician etc.’

‘Online services for online queries have regularly been paused as the surgery has reached capacity for the day. So, the only way to contact the surgery is by phone.’

‘Anything at all would be great but this is what it says in their website “The practice has temporarily removed this form. Please contact the practice for further information.”’

‘I do not have access to online facilities I am 80 years of age.’

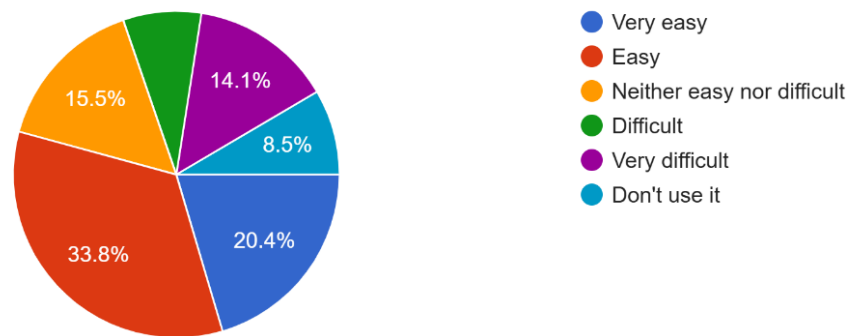
‘I can't contact my GP online.’

Question 9

How easy do you find online services to use?

How easy do you find online services to use?

142 responses



Question 10

How could the online services be easier to use?

This provided an open text box for responses. A representative sample are posted below:

'Available when the practice is closed. Having the fact that we can only contact them online for routine requests being communicated directly rather than just finding out when you call the practice. Sign posts telling you about the NHS app and what is needed to get registered especially when they changed over from previous apps.'

'I think it's sometimes hard to navigate the website - it's worse since it was recently updated to be NHS compliant.'

'Sometimes too many irrelevant questions.'

'It couldn't be easier.'

'Be available all day, not just a couple of hours in the morning.'

'For non-appointment related queries, the form needs to be open at all times.'

‘More options to add free text when the options offered are not appropriate, i.e. my condition is not listed.’

‘The forms or links seem to keep changing making it confusing. Each time I do it, it seems different.’

‘You should be able to login with your name and date of birth, instead of ephemeral and forgettable details which dehumanise you and are disassociating when you are already unwell.’

‘I would like to be able to continue a conversation. If a GP responds, the only way to then discuss that response is to phone or start a new e-consult.’

‘The e-consult forms are hard work when you have chronic conditions. Because you don’t know who is going to read it and how much access or time, they will have I always think it best to give as much information as possible. So, it is time consuming. Also, many of the questions are difficult to answer - not enough options to present the true picture. Ordering repeat prescriptions used to be better for me on the surgery website. It would also be useful to be able to access data from referrals e.g. rheumatology. I am still waiting for a copy of blood test results from February.’

‘Don’t constantly verify.’

‘Video appointments could be introduced.’

‘Confirm receipt and tell me who I will be seeing and their role.’

‘It can’t because some conditions are complex and then you don’t get the care required.’

‘Being able to use it for more things.’

‘They only open the form for about 15 minutes in the morning and then that’s it. Do you still have to be on it at 8am.’

‘It’s easy.’

‘Questions should be geared to the medical issue. You almost have to exaggerate symptoms to get a call back or for it to work properly.’

‘If I can see my health records.’

‘Open more, my practice closes it after about half hour then you have to wait all day to keep checking if they have caught up with requests and re-open the form. More often than not you can't get on and have to wait until the next day.’

‘Can only submit a medical form first thing then it closes.’

‘Align them with NHS app and hospital records.’

‘The set medical questions often are not suitable or relevant. It takes me 15 minutes to 20 minutes to answer all the questions. Then sometimes it says, ‘we can't process, please ring the surgery’. The whole process is too long.’

‘There are no online services to my knowledge. I work from 8am and have two small children that need to be taken with me when I go in person, so would prefer to use online services if they existed and worked.’

‘None.’

‘This is not going to be suitable or accessible for everyone. Currently you can only make appointments online as Lister House will not allow for phone or reception appointments to be made.’

‘For my surgery there are no problems, I understand that the online site of sometimes shut for other surgeries, but this does not affect me.’

‘I find them very user friendly already.’

‘The online request for consultation would be far more useful if available outside office hours. I've often had issues with children's health, not life threatening, but issues which it would be useful to get logged into system, perhaps during evening when situation arises, or I physically have time to report. Only to find that online booking platform is 'not accepting bookings at this time'. Very annoying. To get round this annoyance I physically turn up to surgery as a walk-in, so I can avoid telephone queues.’

‘Allow requests to amend appointments.’

‘Longer hours that are available to use e consultation.’

‘A much more direct path to Accurx,’

‘Often the surgery does not know how it works - I did recently ask about Patches and they were unsure what to do.’

‘The NHS app is easy to navigate, and I am able to access test results and medical records. In regard to the NHS app there is nothing I can think that needs improving.’

Bring able to book "in the future" appointments

‘They are easy to use but difficult to find in the first place. Also, can only be used during practice hours.’

‘None.’

‘Changing an appointment at a hospital.’

‘eConsult could have more straightforward and offer the non-urgent (less urgent) option and also the opportunity to provide updates on existing conditions. It seems too regimented when the patient or carer does not know what new or worsening symptoms may relate to. Sometimes they may be side effects to continuing medication, for example.’

‘Not be so repetitive with the questions asked nor restrictive in what they will allow you to report.’

‘If there were options to explain your need rather than abstract questions that are irrelevant to your needs.’

‘The ones that are available are easy.’

‘Some online services are easy to use, and others are cumbersome and not intuitive. The online services could be instantly made easier to use if there was one system available, across all GP Practices, not several and that system was properly designed with the patient in mind not the IT/tech person designing it.’

‘Avoid completely.’

‘If they had one! That would help.’

‘Because staff at our practice are not allowed to be patients, they cannot see how it works in practice.’

‘All requests have to be made online, and the quality of the response is variable. There is no two-way messaging system once the surgery has replied, so if they do not address your concerns fully, you have to submit a new query all over again.’

Question 11

After submitting your online request do you receive a response from your GP practice in a timely manner?

Another open text box for responses. As before, a representative sample are posted below:

‘Yes.’

‘Sometimes.’

‘Most of the time.’

‘Zero.’

‘Within two hours if you get an emergency appointment, if not it could be two days later.’

‘No because they are too busy. Now you have to submit online for a GP to send a message on the phone offering you an appointment which takes two weeks, and the appointment offered is four weeks later if you can make the day they suggest. If not, you have start over again. Long winded.’

‘Understandably with the current situation in the NHS you have difficulty getting an appointment so somehow or other it needs to be reconstructed. Shortage of GPs and not enough money going into a service which was always so good.’

‘No. In regard to my children, we are usually contacted within seven days. However, myself and my husband sometimes wait up to two weeks for a call back.’

‘Generally.’

‘No.’

‘Repeat prescriptions, yes.’

‘No, never get a response.’

‘When I can use it, they are very quick in replying.’

‘Within 48 hours.’

‘Yes, normally.’

‘Yes - response times are made clear on the original acknowledgement of receipt and kept to.’

‘No reason to. I can’t get what I want from there because there are no appointments online.’

‘I have to chase the GP about everything.’

‘Not as quickly as I would like - sometimes 14 days later.’

‘Yes, very quick response time.’

‘Not sure what their service level agreements are.’

‘Supposedly within 24 hours but sometimes no contact is made.’

‘I don’t know. I don’t trust it.’

‘Define timely - no SLA has been shared so this is a very subjective measure.’

‘You have to keep checking because no one informs you.’

‘No, I had to go in and tell them I had not received a response.’

‘Usually. Normally there is a phone call. Often there is also a reply by email (firstly an acknowledgement) but recently no reply was received by email although one was apparently sent.’

‘Usually within 48 hours but often sooner.’

Question 12

Do you prefer to call or visit your GP practice in person rather than use online?

Yes / No / Sometimes dominated the responses with a reasonably even mix, but there were many fuller answers - a selection is below:

‘F2F visit but online booking.’

‘If you require to be seen urgently but they don’t like calls.’

‘It is sometimes best to talk to someone especially when you are very unwell. I only go into the surgery if absolutely necessary. The surgery does not take any

precautions to prevent infection e.g. no masks are worn and there is poor ventilation. This is appalling and doesn't protect the clinically vulnerable. Online forms can work well and are preferable for some things. They can save time (no phone queues). However sometimes the e-consults are not available because a limit has been reached.'

'Visit for medical appointments but online for generic health checks and medication reviews.'

'This is a Digital First practice, so these options are not possible unless you are absolutely unable to use the online system.'

'Avoid completely.'

'Depends on the complexity.'

'Prefer remote appointments generally.'

'Not fussed.'

'Depends on the issue. Sometimes the enquiry is difficult to explain and speaking to someone is easier. Patients need choice.'

'I'd rather online as human interaction is problematic.'

'Call. I used to prefer the old online system that didn't go through a list of questions but now I just call the practice.'

'I would be happy to book everything online if it was possible.'

'I have bypassed the online form to access the surgery in person on occasion to get a quicker and more appropriate response.'

'I'd prefer in person if I have a medical issue, but don't mind online if test results or advice.'

'I have two young children so calling from 8am is really tough with the school run and trying to get them ready. I have to do that though because there aren't appointments available online, so I have a couple of things I would really like to see a GP for, but the system is too stressful. I would prefer to use online.'

'I find it hard to use due to my disabilities, so in person is easier for me.'

'Depends. Routine stuff is ok online. More complex needs face to face.'

‘If you phone in they tell you to use the NHS app which is very unhelpful.’

‘To be given a choice and the patient to decide as to whether a consultation with a GP is warranted.’

‘I prefer online. It saves so much time waiting on the phone and having to go out extra when not feeling great.’

‘Yes, definitely a visit in person; how a GP can make a diagnosis over the phone without seeing the patient, it is ridiculous.’

‘Visit in person when staff are fully trained for disabled people.’

‘I would like to phone, but it's virtually impossible to get through. Last time I tried I was disconnected after waiting 1 hour and 38 minutes.’

‘Face to face in person.’

‘Online /email communication preferred, which is often ignored.’

‘Would prefer to call if it were possible to get an appointment that way, but it is not so I always now visit in person.’

‘Yes and speak to a person who can action a response immediately.’

‘Either but both facilities are poor and online unavailable.’

‘Yes, but when calling they are now reluctant to do anything other than fill in the form for you.’

Question 13

What has been your experience of using online and how can it be improved?
Sample responses:

‘My surgery claims their patients don’t want online! I do!
Clunky system to navigate.’

‘Prescription request is easy, but I’ve never been successful at getting a face-to-face appointment.’

‘Variable. When it works it can be effective and efficient. But you can be overlooked with an e-consult and on several occasions, I have had to chase it up

as long as three days later. You don't know who will deal with it. In the meantime, you can feel anxious and unsupported. You feel like giving up. You don't get followed up or reviewed. It is hard to track referrals. Some are better than others.'

'I am competent and confident using SystmOnline and the NHS App, but the AccuRx is extremely frustrating, wordy. cumbersome and sends patients around in never ending circles. You get so far with an online request and then it advises you for no apparent reason to. "Use your NHS login to submit your request faster". Ridiculous! The NHS App is still in development and has quite a length to go.'

'How things can be improved: A single online system for communicating with GP practices adopted by all GP surgeries. A system that is designed with real patients from different backgrounds, different age groups and including those who are not au fait with technology.'

'Every GP practice should have an email address where scanned, or Word documents can be sent as attachments. Additionally, training and familiarisation should be offered alongside the push by the NHS to go 'digital by default'.'

'This surgery is not making much use of online services.'

'Get rid of it.'

'Good experience, I think the system is fine.'

'Good, but the access path needs to be streamlined, and it needs to be made more obvious on the website that it is a Digital Triage only practice, unless you really cannot use online services.'

'Sometimes the questions are ambiguous.'

'Quicker process, stop repeated questions.'

'I love everything online it's convenient and easier for me. I hate talking on the phone as I am neurodivergent. People often think I'm being rude.'

'Good so far but doesn't always seem to be available. Can't book GP appointment but can request a call back.'

'Very poor experience. The receptionists should be allowed to override the system when it does not work.'

‘Generally, it’s a positive experience, it avoids the hassle and excessive wait time of calling the GP.’

‘Online consultations have only just been introduced and we have used it once and it was very good. Prescription requesting online is fine. Making appointments online and video consultations would make things much better.’

‘Response to online queries could be better.’

‘The form should be available all day not just a small window.’

‘Actually, being able to make a non-urgent appointment in advance or any appointment.’

‘Letting you know if your repeat prescription is accepted and when it will be available to collect.’

‘Allowing you to book appointments to see a nurse or doctor.’

‘It’s not smooth at all, far too long a form, stupid questions.’

‘It used to be great. I would fill out the form saying what my issues was what I wanted and then then practice would get back to me. Now I spend five minutes answering repetitive and pointless questions.’

‘I avoid as it is no help at all, like the staff.’

‘Using the NHS app, my experience has been excellent.’

‘Been appropriate for my requests. When it appeared serious, I received a call back within hours. If less serious I had an email saying I would get a call that day or next. Always happened.’

‘Availability outside office hours to log a query or medical issue. More, clearer options for requesting information, such as travel immunisations etc.’

‘Entered my problem, acknowledged, responded when they said they would with phone consultation.’

‘Hard to access, hard to navigate, only limited info, some of it SERIOUSLY WRONG.’

‘Repetitive questions, no need to ask about smoking or drinking as it’s on my records.’

‘Difficult to use and not very intuitive; bad functionality.’

‘Don't close it after a short period of time, be open all the time, get more staff to man it etc.’

‘My experience has been wholly positive. It could only be improved by allowing more personal correspondence via the website.’

‘One experience was good; I was contacted for an appointment within a day. Login is a problem when we already have dozens of other logins to remember for all aspects of life.’

‘The system often isn't clear which section to use when needing to update my GP.’

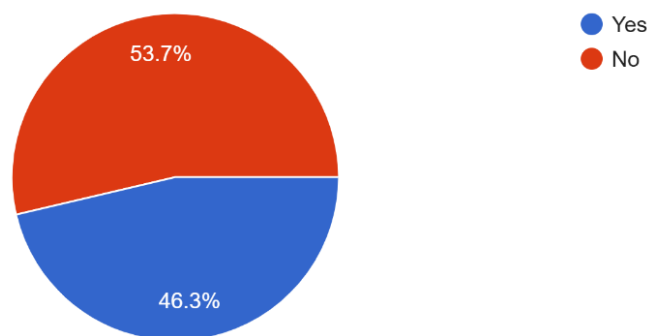
‘The online service is ok to order repeat prescriptions but awful to try and make any kind of contact with the practice.’

Question 14

Would you recommend contacting your surgery online to other people as a first point of contact?

Would you recommend contacting your surgery online to other people as a first point of contact?

136 responses



Question 15

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

‘Digital is the way forward for the future - get every trust to have the same patient friendly digital records that can be accessed by the patient - and make sure every GP surgery has online access without exception.’

‘It must be very difficult for elderly people to access GP’s. It can also be difficult to describe exactly what is wrong and how can a diagnosis be given without seeing someone (most of my follow ups are phone calls not actually seeing someone in person). Leads to very impersonal service.’

‘The service at the practice is appalling - make it as difficult as possible to access services.’

‘The Limes desperately needs this technology; you can’t get through on phones often and it’s ridiculous in this current time.’

‘It’s not a good system for the elderly and people without mobiles.’

‘Many of the elderly do not use computers so are disadvantaged.’

‘This is a Digital Triage only practice. Other methods of contact are not possible unless you are truly unable to use the internet.’

‘Total system failure. Avoid.’

‘My surgery is very good at responding to e-consults, I have a lot of confidence in this method of contacting my surgery.’

‘I would recommend if could use it more for booking apps etc.’

‘I have nearly given up on the GP due to lack of appointments.’

‘Why I cannot book an appointment or see my health records online...’

‘My GP surgery won’t allow me to book or reorder my prescription any way but online.’

‘Initially it seemed annoying and impossible to find on the GP website but now it can be accessed on NHS app it is easier but still not obvious to find the form.’

‘The facility to book appointments has been withdrawn.’

‘Email facility would be good for queries.’

‘To make an appointment currently you spend ages trying to get through and then even longer on hold to normally be told there are no appointments. The

current system is not fit for purpose, and it is nearly impossible to arrange to see anyone.'

'Please advise what to do if surgery online services not available.'

'Excellent for repeat prescriptions but can't change where to collect anymore liked you used to be able to do. Hopeless getting appointment at surgery.'

'No one actually gets the medical attention they need any more. Everything takes too long. For some people organising medical help these days comes too late.'

'I would not recommend my surgery full stop.'

'Make the surgery website easier to use.'

'The new system does not work, and I am very tech minded and very able to navigate systems (I was a trainer for online systems for my company).'

'They are not offering an online appointment service.'

'I have a concern for this people who are not technologically competent. I struggle at times and I'm quite good. And those who are less articulate.'

'I would like to see my X-rays not the written word! It's frustrating!'

'My experience has been quite good with the online form but on one occasion it wasn't. 2. Not everyone has access to a computer or smartphone to access online assistance. 3. Questions are tick boxes and not always appropriate 4. Not always referred to most appropriate person. Passed from one professional to another so not time effective for patient or professional. 5. Unable to access online contact if there are issues with network connection.'

'Infrequent appointments are available. When appointments are available, they are invariably for phone consultation and not with a registered GP.'

'As I am retired, I can call the surgery during the day and rarely have I been more than first in the queue. Online consultation has worked well for me; however, I haven't needed a home visit since joining the surgery four years ago. I get SMS reminders of appointments the day before which is helpful.'

'After period of inactivity on my online access, I have found on a few occasions that my credentials don't work or log in details have been changed. Requires walk-in to surgery to sort out. Very frustrating. Also, repeat prescriptions - recently one of my meds was no longer on my repeat prescription list.....but no

way to find out why without ringing and waiting. Not enough functionality to make online system really useful.'

'I'm happy and I know it leaves more phone lines free for those who are not online to call.'

'Online is ok as a backup but can't replace phone and on site and personal contact.'

'I have to use the online facility for two other people who not online. They are being disadvantaged because priority is given to online.'

'This service doesn't help the elderly, and isn't available all the time, it's very time consuming.'

'Technology is difficult to manage when feeling unwell.'

'Actually, be able to book appointments and see a doctor in a timely manner.'

'Our surgery helps computer illiterate patients.'

'Super GP surgery, I can't fault them. Very lucky to be registered here.'

'What happens when the system crashes? You have no back up plan.'

'How can my 95-year-old mother be expected to use online services?'

'The lack of staff has not helped the situation. You can't get online so you end up in there, one person on reception desk who refuses to make appts. But will deal with everything else you could be standing there for over an hour.'

'I am lucky in that I am very computer literate, so accessing services online is easy for me. I do understand that is not the case for everyone, therefore, in the interests of inclusivity, there should always be a good and responsive alternative - often not the case (although my surgery is fine).'

'I never get to see a doctor when getting an appointment and it is difficult to make future appointments as the online service focuses on on-the-day appointments.'

'This should not be a step towards virtual or AI patient "care".'

'At the age of 80 I feel let down and abandoned. It is impossible to get a GP appointment these days.'

‘It’s a shame that all practices don’t use national system.’

‘The practice is rubbish at text/email-based communication styles. They do not answer completely leading to more unnecessary communication and wasted time on their part and mine’.

‘Not currently an option at Epping - would like to be able to do everything via NHS App so you don’t have multiple apps to use.’

‘It would be helpful if each patient could access their own account, so we don’t have to fill in repeating questions each time we need an appointment.’

‘Online can be very easy for some but impossible for others. You should always be able to talk to someone either on the phone or in person as needed. Not every is comfortable with digital services or have the means to access.’

‘It’s impossible.’

‘The practice does not support general health care and access is poor.’

‘Our surgery operates a telephone triage system. It’s brilliant and we always get a call back - we don’t need to use an online system.’

‘I’d still much prefer to talk, except for repeat prescriptions. I would not ask medical questions.’

‘There needs to be a two-way messaging system, rather than the surgery response being the final word in the matter. Often their response does not fully address your concerns or questions.’

‘I think it’s terrible that in order to get an appointment people have to queue outside the surgery from 7.30am in all weathers just to ensure that they see a GP that day. Appalling.’

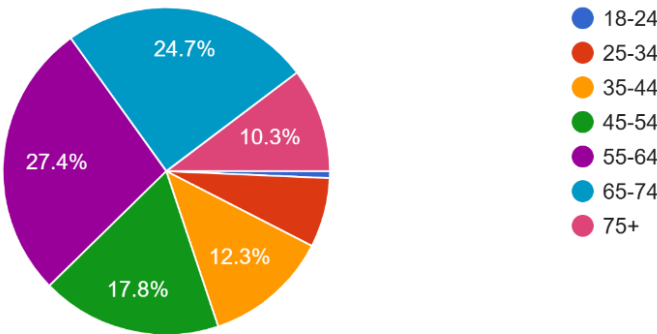
‘Yes, not everyone is confident or likes using online platforms if online was the only way, many people would not bother this could be harmful.’

Demographic Questions

What is your age?

What is your age?

146 responses

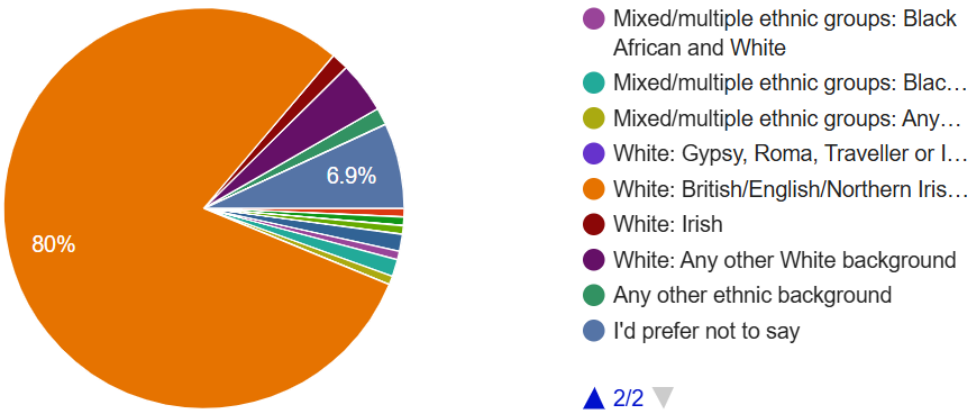


What is your ethnic background?

Please select your ethnic background.

145 responses

 Copy chart



What is your gender?

What is your gender?

146 responses



2.3 Interviews and Conversation

We had an overwhelming response from people offering to talk to us directly and tell us about their stories in depth. We would like to thank everyone who took the time to talk to us and share their experiences, both individually and as part of a group, helping us to produce this report. From those that we have spoken to, we have highlighted two case studies that reflect the lived experience of people in West Essex.

Case Study 1

Kate*

Kate is frustrated with changes in the digital offering, meaning that you can no longer book an appointment through the App or online:

‘I have done historically, yeah. They used to have an app that would work that would allow you to. That was quite convenient, but now they’ve changed. To try and get an appointment, you have to use the website to contact them, because they refuse to take phone calls, and the website is very frustrating because you have a limited number of words you can put in.

They tell you that they will respond within five working days or something ridiculous like that. And then they expect you to be available at whatever time it is convenient for them to call you, which for somebody who works can be impossible. And yet I'm not allowed to do it any other way other than going in in person. Which is also not very practical when I work and have children and am busy.

Before, you could just see what the availability was. And for me that that works perfectly.

I'm young enough that the online world isn't scary, but the App is pointless. I can't really do anything on it at all, but when I contact the surgery for help, they just say it's the app that's the problem, it's not their problem, and they can't help.

And I've got kids, which makes things so complicated. It's never really worked online with an App because it's linked to your own personal account and is so confusing. And again, no one at the surgery is able to explain it or offer any help.

I'm not allowed to call the surgery to book a routine appointment. They have a very strongly worded message on their answer phone saying that you're only supposed to phone for emergency on the day appointments and otherwise you have to use the online booking methods. How is that supposed to work for my parents who are elderly and have limited or no online skills? They're put off by the answer phone message and then think 'maybe I won't bother'. Their only alternative is to go to the surgery in person, but luckily, they have me and I help them out.

What makes it more ridiculous is that for somebody like me, the digital roll-out is exactly the sort of thing that is supposed to make things better. Someone who's working full time, someone that has children, someone that has a house to run. But the App is useless for anything other than booking repeat prescriptions, and the website is clunky, not user friendly, and feels completely unreliable.'

We also talked about digital access for non-GP related issues:

'In the past I used it for hospital stuff, yeah. I've used it for booking blood tests online at Broomfield, and that worked incredibly well. That was really convenient. Likewise, just booking referral appointments when I've needed them. I mean, that's quite a long time ago now, but you used to get a letter through for a referral and then you could just go online and look at what hospital had availability and when, and that that actually worked quite well. I haven't had to do that for a while, and I'm not sure if it's still an option even.'

Overall, Kate's thoughts were very much in line with a large number of people I spoke with:

'I don't think that it should replace the traditional means of people accessing healthcare, because I think for people like my parents, or like I say for me with my children - as the system seems to be now anyway - I'm always going to have to do it by some other means. Having the flexibility of options is really important.'

Case Study 2

Amanda*

Amanda wanted to talk about the technical issues, and problems caused when first signing up without being given clear guidance and information. She became completely confused and, in the end, overwhelmed:

‘I’ve used the services partly on my own behalf, but also on behalf of my elderly mother. So, there are other perspectives that I can give.

We had to join the new GP surgery just under five years ago about the same time that COVID started. Our previous surgery closed, and they asked us at that time would we want to access the services online that they were offering.

So, I signed us both up for the possibility of doing that. Because my mother isn’t good with mobile phones or anything digital, I don’t think we gave a mobile number for both of us at that particular point and that became critical later on because we hadn’t realised how important that would be.

I have to use her mobile on her behalf. It’s just a general phone that sits there and it’s used for this type of thing. But it became very important later on when we tried to sign up for the NHS app or NHS online, if you like.

We tried verifying her identity for the NHS online, not using the app on her mobile, obviously because I was never going to use it that way on her behalf. It didn’t even like her passport, which is still perfectly valid. I couldn’t even get a proper scanned copy of the passport using a mobile to take the photo and then uploading it.

So, there were all sorts of problems at the very beginning so couldn’t start to verify identity that way and then had to go for the second option, which is to verify it using the information from the GP surgery. But remember I’d never given the mobile number for her in the beginning, so we got all the codes from the GP surgery that you need to have, the three separate codes and everything. We knew that she could be logged in through the system online. But even with the codes we then failed to be able to verify her identity and this went on several times.

But the several times is important because I found out later that you shouldn’t try more than I think three times, otherwise it will fail anyway. But then an error code popped up - 7000. Nobody knows what the code means so every time I’ve attempted to actually get them to tell me (whether it’s the local digital representative or whether it’s the online help, which I think is largely posted by a bot rather than by an individual), I’ve got no real help at all.

It’s very hard to deal with, so if you do have a problem, it’s just impossible. Really. Then, if you don’t reply instantly, or if they say you haven’t quite answered the

question, they then say or gather that you're satisfied with their response and that's the end of it. We've closed your enquiry and so on.

There are so many ways that people would be put off if they fail to log in that way. I've complained about it to their complaints team. I did ring them up and finally got through to somebody and they said, 'oh, no, we can't deal with that.'

So, I don't think very much of the support that you can get if you do actually have a problem. I think what had really happened in the end was we got a new passcode from the GP surgery which turned out to be the same passcode as the original one. So that was obviously wrong and couldn't have been used.

Finally, I resolved the whole thing myself.

I have many decades of using computers and whatever else of experience and so on. It wasn't that I was a novice in any respect whatsoever. It was simply that the information is just baffling. And any response is not terribly helpful. There were loads of extra questions I had to ask, and so it went round several times. I eventually worked out that I could generate a new passcode myself and use it.

Also, by this time I'd also given the mobile number to the surgery. The surgery was aware that we were trying to do this through various combinations of trial and error. The next time I tried, it worked, but I still don't know exactly which of those things was the critical one.

It's still completely baffling to me and I couldn't give advice on that basis to anybody else, and the reason I'm saying that is because I'm also involved with digital inclusion in general locally and that's why I've been interested in finding out whether the NHS or anybody else is going to do anything to help with their people setting this up themselves.

I mean, I gather that people who try to do this on their mobile phones in the first instance, often have much more success because obviously that it is the mobile they're using and so on. But there's obviously some difference between what we were doing originally and what is the easier route and to go down the wrong path. It's a complete nightmare.

For many people it becomes straightforward and easy to do. But as soon as anything is slightly different then that can easily cause questions and queries and the problem is there doesn't seem to be anybody who's just there that can sort it out for you, so you're left in a bit of a dilemma.

I was quite dismayed when I discovered that there wasn't even anybody who answered the phone who was in any kind of position at all to even recall the enquiry.

You know, they just couldn't discuss it. They were quite nice about it, but it just wasn't something they were there to do.

You know these sessions that are being now set up locally in in GP surgeries; I don't know how successful they will be if people have anything that is very lengthy, I'm worried that it just won't work.

Using the GP surgery website is not too bad. It did change over last year, but all the local ones changed over. They're all slightly different though. It's quite good now I think, and relatively easy to navigate and I think certain things seem to have changed.

I did notice we're holding an information/training event, so that side of things seems to be working alright. The system online is a bit confusing, but you can still use it online or you can use the NHS app but as long as you know what you're doing, that's fine. But if you were a beginner, I think you would still find that was a bit peculiar, and I know from personal experience why people are struggling.'

Discussions

In open forum settings, people spoke very openly and honestly about their opinions. The overriding sense that came across was one of digital being cold and hard and impersonal, at exactly the time when people want warmth and empathy and support.

Thoughts about the current state of NHS care are still firmly focussed on GP access, and hospital waiting times. Services described as 'new-fangled', 'e-whatever' and 'digital nonsense' are often not on people's radar, especially if they don't directly enable you to get an appointment to see your GP when you're poorly.

At the same time, developing and moving healthcare into the 21st century is warmly welcomed and encouraged, as part of an understanding that the NHS needs to modernise and streamline - something regularly commented on in terms of administration and paperwork and 'the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing'.

'The NHS is under so much pressure and so many people are working so hard to make it better. Surely digital systems can be a huge part of (admittedly) a massive program of improvement. It has to be implemented everywhere it can make a difference'.

3.0 Key Findings and Recommendations

Key Findings

The conversations I had, and the comments left through the survey were overwhelmingly dominated by people wanting to be able to make an appointment, and the frustration they have from not being able to easily access a GP face-to-face.

How they get that appointment isn't the most important thing, but expectations are that digital and online options should be improving access, or at least making it less onerous. However, that is clearly not what's happening. Technology is still baffling to many, and not trusted by many more. People inherently like the 'old ways' and want a return to what they consider to be simplicity.

Aside from ordering a repeat prescription, or booking a Covid jab, there is little or no understanding of the scope of apps, or online services, or digital options, or whatever they are conceived to be. People link digital with GPs, rather than broader opportunities.

In general, younger people are more comfortable in an online environment, but many find the technology to be clunky and simply not up to speed on what is expected in the digital world. Too many have problems getting set up, and the 'helpdesk' type support is considered completely inadequate.

For those less able, the whole thing seems daunting, they don't understand, and they feel they are being ignored and left behind.

Recommendations

Access

Access to services needs to be equitable and be SEEN to be equitable. Older generations, minority groups, those with disabilities, and everyone in Essex needs to understand that not being able to use digital services will NOT impact their ability to access great healthcare.

Education - training

Basic training and getting set up is a must, and as such must be invested in. This requires a pro-active and inventive approach to reach people throughout the county in both urban and rural areas, not just through GPs, but through community groups, libraries, church halls, newsletters, charity shops, cafés, schools, colleges, etc, etc. Think 'outside the box'.

Education - broadening the scope

People need to understand the full scope of how digital services can help them access healthcare services. This is more likely to be successfully done through media campaigns etc, but it MUST be accompanied by working closely with user

groups to ensure that ALL websites, apps, text services, email services are fit for purpose and match people's NEEDS, not just what professionals and app designers think they WANT.

Consistency

It's difficult to educate people about the scope and effectiveness of digital services when different surgeries and PCNs are running different systems, different booking procedures, and different capabilities. It may feel like an impossible task, but the consistency and continuity of approach must be as streamlined as possible. If this isn't tackled, it becomes yet another barrier to access.

4.0 Conclusion

Despite some resistance, it's generally accepted that e-consultation, apps, websites and other digital services are going to play a significant role in how we access healthcare in the future.

Developing these services will bring positive benefits to all, and many are already seeing and experiencing it themselves. However, in its current state, for many there is too much confusion, scepticism and misunderstanding, alongside inconsistency, poor technology and a lack of education.

There will forever be elements to work on and improvements to be made (such is the pace of change in the online world), so it's a coherent, considered, one step at a time approach that's needed. A rolling programme of improvement, firmly strapped to patient engagement, listening, and understanding.

The 5 key domains identified in the NHSE framework for action on digital inclusion (see 1.2 Topic Background) are sensible, achievable and clearly defined. But this piece of engagement clearly shows that the emphasis must be on developing a rounded understanding of its aims, objectives, and benefits to all in the community if it is to be fully appreciated and embraced.

5.0 Terminology and Acronyms

App - A type of software that can be installed and run on a variety of technological devices.

West Essex - Districts of Uttlesford, Harlow and Epping Forrest.

NHSE - NHS England.

Case Study Names* - These have been changed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Quote from Avni Shah, Director of Primary Care Transformation, regarding the Online Services report:

“We would like to express our gratitude to everyone who contributed to the Healthwatch Essex report on Online GP Services. We asked Healthwatch to conduct a survey to gather patients' perspectives on various aspects of GP online services. This included how they accessed the services, their ease of use, suggestions for improvements, and their overall experiences with them.

The feedback we received will be invaluable in shaping our future work in this area. It will help enhance our communication with patients regarding new developments in primary care and guide the introduction of new online services. Additionally, we aim to use these insights to ensure that practices provide equitable online access and maintain clarity in their communication with patients about these services.”



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