The Public Experience: Digital Access to Health Services

April 2022

healthwatch
North Yorkshire

Pulse Briefing

Introduction

Welcome to our second Pulse Briefing, these briefings complement our Pulse Reports when there is a specific topic that we think needs to be explored. Each briefing has a different topical focus, which on this occasion is the use of digital methods to access health services.

Focus issue: Digital access to health services

Increasing the use of digital methods to access health services has been a long-term strategic goal for the NHS for many years[1]. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the use of digital health technologies, with NHS Digital reporting that more than 16 million people have now signed up for the NHS app[2]. Healthwatch North Yorkshire is working with other local Healthwatch across the Humber Coast and Vale region to further increase the uptake and awareness of the NHS app amongst communities.

In one of our previous reports, The Public Experience: GP Appointments[3], we found that most people still contact their GP by phone. However, those that used online methods generally had a better experience. This briefing further explores people's experiences of using digital methods to access NHS services. In this instance, digital methods refer to GPs' own online systems and/or the NHS app.

1   NHS England » Digital transformation
2   Around half of people in England now have access to digital healthcare - NHS Digital
3   Healthwatch North Yorkshire December GP Pulse Briefing 2021.pdf

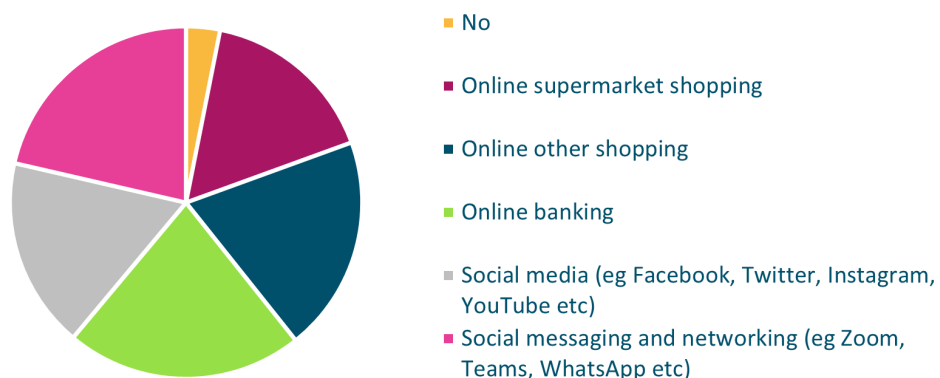## Do people use digital methods to access health services?

In our sample of 81 respondents, 66% said they used online services for health in some form, either via the NHS app and/or through their GP's online service. Respondents use their GP's online service mostly to order repeat prescriptions, book/manage appointments and to view their medical records or test results. Whilst the NHS app is also used for these functions, this is to a lesser degree, with the COVID vaccine passport being the most frequently used function for the app. This may be because GP online services (in some GP practices) are more established for ordering repeat prescriptions and booking/managing appointments.

What Do People Use Digital Methods For?
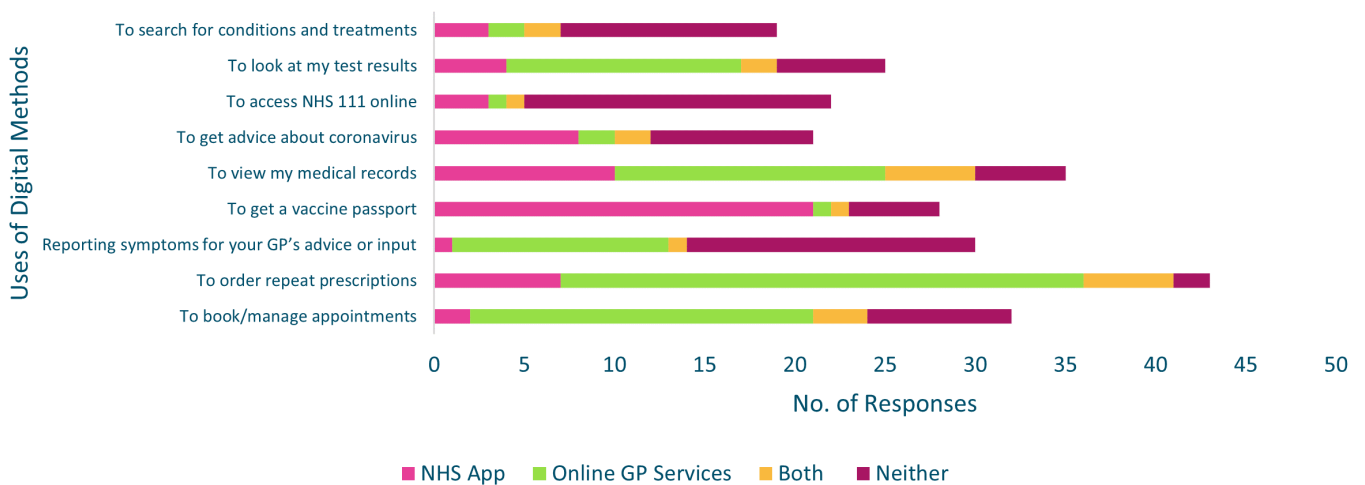
It is interesting to note that 97% of the sample said they use other online services such as online shopping, banking and social messaging/ networking. This is significantly higher than the percentage who use online health services (66%) which suggests more work is still needed to make using online services for health as easy and intuitive as it is for shopping, banking and staying connected. However, those who don't use any other online services expressed the difficulties they have faced when trying to use digital methods to access health services as they are not used to using online systems.

Do You Use Any Other Online Services?

- No
- Online supermarket shopping
- Online other shopping
- Online banking
- Social media (eg Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube etc)
- Social messaging and networking (eg Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp etc)

It is also important to recognise that digital access is not just for the younger generation as in this sample there were people from all age groups who do not use or are not keen on using digital methods. Similarly, there were a number of positive comments about the use of digital methods from those in older age groups.

Willingness to use digital options for health

When asked if they would be willing to use digital methods to access NHS services, including for outpatient appointments, almost half (48%) said they would, and 29% said they would if they had help/support. Moreover, when asked if they would be willing to use digital options to help manage their care or condition at home (e.g. consultations, symptom monitoring and management) 30% said they would, and 36% said they would if they had more information. This mostly positive response suggests there is opportunity to explore these ideas. However, it was noted that service users should be involved in the development of any apps/online services to ensure they are user friendly.

A number of respondents stressed the importance of choice when it comes to using digital options, with some saying their willingness to use digital methods would depend on what the condition/illness was. Respondents were clear that digital options should not replace face to face appointments in cases where seeing a healthcare professional in person is essential for effective treatment. It was also noted that in some cases, understanding of what is needed for effective care resides with the person accessing the care, hence why choice is key.

This suggests many people are willing to use digital options for health where appropriate, as long as they have sufficient help, support and information regarding this.

What do people like about using digital methods to access health services?

Of those who use digital methods to access health services, 79% said they were very helpful or somewhat helpful. Some of the main reasons why people like using digital methods is because they provide quick and easy access and people can see all of their health information/records in one place.

> *"A symptom can occur in the evening, or I can consider it more in the evening, and I can access the GP service and thoroughly report it and ask for meaningful advice and support. Using the online service takes a bit more time, making sure I explain the situation clearly, but I am in the comfort of my own home and I'm happy to do this, knowing that a health professional will be in touch to discuss. I use NHS online services for little health niggles, this is an option if I don't think it's important enough to take up a physical appointment, but it's perhaps beyond 'self-help.'"*

> *"Good to be able to access it at any time and it's easy - don't have to wait for someone to answer the phone".*

> *"I like that I have everything in one place. I can book appointments with my GP through the app, view my medical records and I also have access to my NHS COVID pass".*

Why people do not use digital methods to access health services

The majority of those who don't use digital methods to access health services said they don't have a smart phone or tablet or are not interested in using digital methods. One respondent said that due to their learning difficulty, they couldn't use digital services. This once again highlights the importance of choice when it comes to accessing healthcare digitally and the importance of recognising that for some people, online services are not the most appropriate or accessible option. There were a number of comments about face-to-face appointments being the preferred method for some and the desire to talk about health concerns or symptoms with a healthcare professional, rather than just registering concerns online.

Therefore, for some, technology is useful for certain functions, such as for seeing test results and ordering repeat prescriptions but they would prefer non-digital options for other needs such as discussing certain health concerns/conditions. A number of people said they do not want digital to become the only available option but for it to be one of the options that can be used where appropriate.

> ❝ "It worries me that so much is going online but what happens if your phone is not 4 or 5G, what happens if you can't afford to use 'attend anywhere', what happens if you are not IT proficient and you have to ask someone to help - do you want some unknown [person] helping you access your personal medical record, how accessible are these websites for those with physical or sensory impairment or for those with intellectual impairments".

> ❝ "I don't like using online services for the GP service because I don't believe serious diagnoses is accurate, I only use this service for illnesses I know I have and need medications for".

How could digital methods be improved?

Whilst many praised the convenience and ease of using digital methods, there were a number of comments about the ways these methods could be improved.

Some respondents said the NHS app and GP online services don't always work as they should and the information is not always up to date (e.g. there is not always real time appointment information for bookings). More personalisation of online services was suggested, including options for people to record preferences for types of appointments and preferred information format. Comments were also made about online services linking up all NHS information so appointments with different hospital departments and GPs could be booked in one place.

For the NHS app in particular there were comments about the registration process being difficult and the app not being user friendly. It was suggested that users should be more involved to help improve the design of the app.

In relation to GP online services, there were a number of people who said the option to book an appointment using their GP's online system had been useful but has now been disabled (possibly due to capacity to respond) so they would like this function to be re-enabled. There were also concerns around some services being time limited by GP practices (so not available to use 24/7) and comments about GPs not always

acting on information submitted online meaning it has to be followed up by phone.

> ❝ "To report a health issue: questions are cumbersome and repetitive. Also, my surgery now seems to have discontinued online service".
>
> ❝ "More accessible and simple pictorial instructions are needed".
>
> ❝ "They don't carry out the desired actions they promised, so you have to ring them and chase it up anyway, that makes online services a waste of time".

Conclusions

- Many praised digital methods for the ease of booking appointments, ordering repeat prescriptions and seeing test results.

- Choice is key; digital access should be one of the available options, so it can be used where appropriate. Each option should have equal priority and responsiveness and at no time should there be a two tier system which works better for those who have digital access/can use digital methods.

- With support and information, people are willing to try digital health services where it seems appropriate and can help them/fit with their lifestyle. This should be further investigated, working with potential service users to ensure equity of access to healthcare, particularly in rural areas. However, any developments must recognise that not everyone has or wants digital access and so other non-digital or supported-digital options should remain available to all.

- It is important that digital methods work well and are easy to use, are available for all who want to use them, users are involved in their design and they are accurate and up to date.

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Thank you to everyone who responded to our survey and contributed feedback. Your voices help inform and shape health and social care services in North Yorkshire.

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