

Developing NHS Online: Local Healthwatch Consultation

Healthwatch Wandsworth Response

1. What insight(s) can you share on people's use of digital health services, such as signing up to and using the NHS App, using online referral tracking tools, booking appointments online or giving feedback virtually, in your local area?

From speaking to residents, health care professionals and voluntary organisations we understand there are a range of barriers that prevent patients using digital health services. These include age, smartphone access (often as a result of digital poverty), communication needs, and language. Furthermore, there is a substantial percentage of residents who simply prefer to use traditional methods of accessing healthcare, whether this be due to a preference to speak face to face to someone or not feeling confident in using online tools.

In addition, the delivery and acknowledgment of the Accessible Information Standard (AIS) was key in making those who had particular communication needs feel confident in using digital health services.

[You can read more about our findings about the delivery of the AIS at a South West London level here](#)

Integration of the digital services between primary and secondary care trusts seems to still have issues with tracking referrals, booking appointments etc. which has discouraged patients from thinking that digital tools are effective and consistent.

Regarding feedback virtually, we have noticed that online surveys and questionnaires by NHS Trusts and the ICB seem to receive overwhelmingly white middle class respondents, not reflecting the demographic breakdown we would expect for our Borough.

People reported that they do not always have a private space to use digital services (they may not have a living space that is not shared (e.g. if they live in supported accommodation) or that is confidential enough for conversations with sensitive information (e.g. disclosing LGBTQIA+ identities or mental health)). People with mental health conditions can find that using technology adds to their anxiety and may need additional support. On the other hand, some people find not having to attend a busy physical location is better for their anxiety.

Some people disclosed that they found they might not disclose everything to a professional because they are not face to face.

2. What has worked well to upskill people on understanding, signing up to and accessing digital health services?

NHS Digital Care Co-Ordinator outreach has led to our borough having very high usage of the NHS App, however I believe this has been cut by SWL ICB. Otherwise, people rely on charities and voluntary organisations such as Age UK Wandsworth and Power2Connect to upskill people. Power2Connect also provides smartphones and SIMs to people. There have been some courses to help raise awareness about how to manage health online.

3. How can we help patients understand how the Online NHS Trust will work in practice, especially when:

a. choosing to be referred to NHS Online through a primary care appointment

Explain clearly that is optional, explain how it works throughout the process; they may assume all meetings/correspondence will be online/virtual and need to clarify if this is the case.

GP Practices should clearly explain that the Trust is now available and provide this information to patients through a variety of different communication channels, i.e at appointments, through text, on the website, etc.

b. arranging consultations and diagnostics through the NHS App

Ensure that the interface within the NHS App is user friendly. The ability to book/request GP appointments through the NHS App is still not user-friendly and puts many patients off using the NHS App for this very common healthcare need.

c. the stages of treatment along standardised pathways

Patients will need an accessible contact who can support them if something doesn't work for them or they are not sure how to progress.

4. What communication is needed to help patients and clinicians understand their new choice?

Explain why it has been created and what the benefits are. Explain the impact it will have on their referral journey; will anything be majorly different that they need to be aware of?

Patients will want to know where their data is stored, how it is kept safe, and who will see it.

It needs to be clear that the Trust is optional for patients, there should also be clear communication that not utilising the Trust will not impact a patient's care.

5. From your knowledge of local patient experiences, what do you see as the main benefits of the Online NHS Trust for patients in your local area? In your response, please identify where these benefits may differ for different cohorts (for example, considering characteristics, geography, digital literacy).

We see some of the potential main benefits for patients as the following:

- The ability to easily connect patients with staff who speak their language. This would be incredibly useful for a diverse borough such as Wandsworth where a multitude of languages are spoken
- It would also be useful for those who cannot attend meetings during core hours due to work or other commitments.

6. What are the key areas of concern for local Healthwatch organisations about the offer of elective care through the Online NHS Trust and how should they be mitigated?

We see some of the potential main concerns for patients as the following:

- How do you ensure that those who choose not to use the Online NHS Trust are not put at a disadvantage. Those who do not have the NHS App or unable to use it, will they start to feel that they are unfairly being disadvantaged?
- If referral through the Online NHS Trust leads to people having to travel will this disproportionately effect those who don't have the means to do this?
- When GP at Hand (an online GP practice) was introduced, there was a knock-on impact on surgeries in several areas who lost their patients and therefore their income. Could there be similar unintended impacts on existing services?
- Where a local hospital already offers online support, will patients know that this is the case so that they can choose between the online options?

7. How can we work with you and the public to design the Online NHS Trust?

Ensure different groups with different access requirements are consulted during this process – physical impairments, neurodiverse, minorities, those with learning disabilities.

Local Healthwatches (LHW) and DHSC could hold patient workshops. If DHSC provided tablets with a test version of the Trust's digital interface, patients could feedback on its accessibility. There could also be an open session where DHSC representatives discuss the Trust with patients and hear their feedback directly. Such discussions could be an

effective way of engaging groups experiencing health inequalities, as LHW could invite representatives from those communities.

The service must also ensure it follows the Accessible Information Standard and should therefore workshop the service with those who have a variety of communication needs

8. How should DHSC evaluate whether the policy is a success for patients?

Ensure patient feedback of the service and Trust is built into the evaluation. Ensure people with lived experience are involved in the evaluation.

Develop monitoring metrics that related to what is important to the patients and patient reported outcomes. The friends and family test question 'would you recommend this service' is not sufficient.

9. What should the new Online NHS Trust learn about processes for capturing and responding to patient complaints?

Patients want a simple route to making a complaint, however there must be options for this to also be done via a non-digital route.

The complaint process needs to be responsive and simple. Patients also need to know they can raise concerns outside of a formal complaint route and these concerns should be responded to. Some patients are reluctant to make formal complaints because of the time and energy needed (most of them are unwell and have a lot of health administration to undertake already) and many fear that making a complaint could mean that the care they receive is negatively affected.

10. How should the Online NHS Trust ensure people's experiences are captured and used for service improvement?

Ensure patients are asked for feedback throughout the journey they have with the Online NHS Trust and after discharge and that they can ask questions.

You will need to have the resources to investigate certain issues in more depth through focus groups and surveys.

11. Do you have any wider comments that you would like to share?

The core challenges are embedding it into the existing NHS without confusing staff and patients and avoiding a two-tier system with traditional services. A certain amount of patient feedback in advance will help design it, but feedback received once the Trust is operational will also be crucial to making it a success. Healthwatch could support both sets of engagement and share further feedback received with the Trust and DHSC.