

Working with GP Practices to build digital skills of patients

The One Digital partner projects based at local Age UK partners in South Lakeland and Blackburn with Darwen, Citizens Online local Switch projects based in Brighton & Hove and Gwynedd in North Wales, Digital Unite and SCVO came together to discuss working in GP Practices in November 2019.

Partners had a variety of experiences linked to improving patient uptake of online GP services. These included setting up and running Digital Champion projects within practices; surveying patients in practices to improve understanding of patient attitudes to online services and patient use of health Apps.

Project learning points were:

- Practices have varied levels of patient engagement with digital services. Targets for increasing patient sign up can incentivise practice engagement with Digital Champion projects. Current targets for patients to access digital services are relatively low at 20% in England for instance, compared to the significant engagement by the public with the shift to digital services provided by local authorities. Information on registration for online services in each practice can be found on the [NHS \(England\) Services website](#) the site provides information for each GP Practice in England. A review of the data shows significant differences between practices even within the same geographical areas.
- Building on existing relationships with GP practices provides positive opportunities for engagement. Some partners were already working with GP practices on other projects (for instance, Age UK local partners providing home from hospital services, or social prescribing projects). The project would then be able to build on these relationships and develop new Digital Champion projects. The driver for engagement is often to improve the numbers accessing patient online services and digital skills in general. Other approaches to engaging practices included direct contact to Practice Managers by email outlining the potential benefits of a digital inclusion project; and through Clinical Commissioning Group prioritisation and commissioning of digital inclusion work.
- The quality and accessibility of patient online systems impacts on patient engagement. Complex processes can lead to patient disengagement. Practices benefit from making the process of registering for online services as simple and timely as possible.
- Patient engagement with Digital Champions through informal drop-in sessions can be quite low, Age UK Blackburn with Darwen for instance had an engagement rate of one third of patients approached. Sometimes people who are online are not open to using the Practice online services or health Apps. Digital Champions then respect these preferences. Understanding why this happens is important to building better projects. The practice involvement in promoting their services and benefits of using them helps engagement.

- Computer facilities within practices are varied. Many do not offer free WiFi for patients. Some have dedicated spaces available for Digital Champions to use for training.
- Patients can usually see the benefits of ordering repeat prescriptions online. Pharmacies could be involved in increasing use on online systems.
- Patient engagement with online appointment booking systems in the experience of the projects had been limited and sometimes complex. The availability of on-the-day/urgent appointments online means many patients still opt to telephone the practice. Online appointment systems are anecdotally sometimes being used to prevent people who feel lonely or isolated from booking routine/repeated follow up appointments with a GP.
- Patient use of health apps is very varied in the experience of the Citizens Online projects in Gwynedd and Brighton & Hove. There is often confusion about which are 'trusted' Apps. Our experiences within the Community of Practice is that practice staff can have limited knowledge of which Apps to recommend. This is likely to be more the case for locally developed Apps. Staff can have limited knowledge of health Apps and would benefit from training alongside Digital Champions in local and national Apps which are particularly useful.
- Patient feedback on telephone screening by administration staff in GP Practices is often negative & can impact on patient engagement with digital changes to services in general.
- There had been limited success in engaging and working with Practice Patient Participation Groups. Even with active Groups they generally do not see their role as being to offer Digital Champion support to other patients. Some projects are still planning to offer training to them.

Top tips for working within primary care health practices include:

Engagement of learners & role of practice staff

The hooks for engaging learners are clear and can include openings such as 'how easy did you find it to book an appointment today?' Information stalls to attract patients have also been used. Hooks for patients who rarely visit GP practices are more difficult to find, as they don't have the incentive of the need to use booking systems regularly.

Work to assess patient interest in Brighton & Hove by Citizens Online focused on the interest of patients in having digital skills support. In demonstrations of how the online system worked, 83% of patients were then interested in signing up to use online services.

Some older people more regularly attend surgeries, and so it is beneficial to increasing the reach of the digital inclusion project to change the time of the sessions week by week, to ensure that there is a different footfall of people engaged.

The role of practice staff is important in encouraging people to get involved and access digital skills support. Practice staff benefit from information so that they

understand the purpose of the project. It is essential that the Practice Manager is fully engaged with the project.

Booking patients in for a session with a Digital Champion can be more effective for both the person being supported and in use of project time.

Practices will find that telephone booking systems are sometimes popular because they allow for triage of patients in a way that is more difficult with an online system. Practices are reflecting on the different systems and how they impact on patients as they make changes. Some practices find that with nurse appointments for instance, a telephone triage system is more beneficial as it enables the appointment length to be adjusted dependent upon the care to be provided. The needs of patients with complex health conditions, or who need a quick emergency appointment are being balanced. The role of Digital Champions in supporting patients to understand the options available for appointment bookings can be integrated into changes in systems.

Registering patients

Providing clear information for patients signing up for online services helps to ensure the process works smoothly. This can include publicising what identification documents need to be provided to the practice.

Digital Champion projects should discuss with the practice if they can provide immediate access to the online system through log on details, so the patient does not have to wait or come back a week later to be given access. This allows momentum and engagement to continue.

Often patients forget their log on details if they are too complex and not used regularly. Support from the Practice to reset details may be critical in building confidence and motivation to use online systems.

Confidentiality

Digital Champions working in GP Practices need clear guidance on how to ensure that they are able to maintain patient confidentiality, and to have training to ensure they can respond to any safeguarding or privacy concerns for more vulnerable patients such as those with learning disabilities.

Patients are more likely to engage with Digital Champions in larger surgeries where there is more space for private patient engagement. If practices have private spaces available to use these would be preferential.

One Digital partner activity & engagement with GP surgeries

Age UK (AUK) Blackburn with Darwen

The team had engaged with 4 GP surgeries (by December 2018). The 'Here to Help' team were already working with GP surgeries and therefore AUK already has established relationships. Contacts with Practice Managers and Practice reception staff have been good. Engagement and commitment with the Practice Managers has been critical to setting up drop in sessions. Working in the surgeries has been

labour intensive for volunteers – lots of resources are needed for a relatively few number of people engaged.

AUK South Lakeland

The team had engaged with 8 GP surgeries (by December 2018). Initially the project sent emails to practice managers to set-up project delivery, as the project recognised that it is difficult to get an opportunity to speak with them directly. There are local differences in the type of online services offered, particularly around access to patient records. For some surgeries the wait time of 10 days to receive log on information to access services online means that patients lose motivation. The team have also found the work to be resource hungry for the number of people you engage with – nevertheless, it is recognised as important quality work.

Citizens Online

Both of the deep dive Switch projects (in Brighton & Hove and Gwynedd) have had projects engaging with local GP Practices. They have worked with the Practice(s) to better understand the attitudes and needs of patients to engaging with online Practice services, plus patient use of health Apps and health information. Work was also done to directly support or signpost patients requiring digital skills development to local learning opportunities, or was provided direct to the patients at the Practice.

The most recent work carried out with two Practices in Brighton was commissioned by the local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). The Practices were selected for their lower online engagement rates (less than 8% of patients). The overall aims were: 'To help people get online in areas where some vulnerable groups are at a high risk of digital exclusion in 'hard to reach' areas and to help patients access GP online services in GP practices which have a low uptake of online services.'

Some of the key results included that:

- There was low level take up of on the day online appointment booking opportunities.
- Over 50% of patients were unaware of what online services were offered by the Practice(s).
- Over 75% of patients were positive about the possibility of accessing online services.
- 10% reported they had no internet access.
- Under 10% would want support to access services online. Although when a demonstration of the online service was provided respondents were positive about future engagement and sign up to digital services.

Digital Unite

Digital Unite had worked with partners in Waltham Forest where a pilot project had been arranged between the local Council & CCG. The project had involved putting Digital Champions into surgeries and helping patients to use online services. Engagement rates with GP online services were at 15% participation rate across the Borough. Four Digital Champions had worked across 3 Practices with a primary focus on signing people up to online services. The pilot remains active. The

Digital Champions working in GP Practices get additional supplementary training to take on the role.

SCVO

SCVO work in health settings has been carried on outside of the One Digital project and has included work with a social prescribing project in West Dunbartonshire. The project included digital skills support as one of the available options as practice managers identified this as something that was needed locally.

SCVO is also involved in the [MPower](#) project, an Inter-Reg/EU funded project involving Scotland, N Ireland and Ireland). The project aims to promote self-management of health and care by over 65s through Community Navigators. The Community Navigators support individuals to have well-being plans connecting them to community-based activities as well as technology to enhance the support available to them. The project will use tools and Apps to allow people to better self-manage their health.

The policy landscape and operating priorities in Scotland include the development of 'My Account' a single portal log on to allow access to both Council and health services.

Digital inclusion work in health – Resources & information

Policy

NHS England Long Term [Plan](#) (January 2019)

[Blog MHPC](#) NHS England Long Term Plan published for the NHS in England January 2019. This blog summarises the digital aspects of the Plan. It also highlights the growing need for digital skills support for NHS England users (January 2019)

Blog [One Digital](#) Programme Director on the NHS England Long Term Plan (January 2019)

Gov Tech Leaders, News – the new plans for digital access to GP services [article](#), January 2019

Scotland

[Scotland's Digital Health and Care Strategy: enabling, connecting and empowering \(2018\)](#)

This strategy is about how care for people in Scotland can be enhanced and transformed through the use of digital technology. It is not specific to individual specialisms, groups or organisations: it encompasses the whole range of health, social care and wellbeing services commissioned and provided by Health Boards, by Integration Authorities and by Local Authorities and their third and independent sector partners. Importantly, it extends as well to informal care, self-care, prevention and public health.

Wales

A Digital Health and Care [Strategy](#) for Wales (2015)

Welsh Government funding [announcement](#) (November 2018) of £3m investment to improve access to technology for health staff and patients.

Digital Inclusion in Health and Care in Wales (2018)

Joint [report](#) from the Carnegie UK Trust and Wales Cooperative Centre examines the potential for digital inclusion to improve the health and wellbeing of older people in Wales with a limiting long-term condition. Written by Bob Gann, an expert in this field and the former Widening Digital Participation Director at NHS England, the report sets out 18 recommendations for action for NHS Wales, Welsh Government and other service providers.

Statistics

Information on percentage of patients using online services by GP practice is available through the NHS (England) Services website. The search below shows the variations in Brighton & Hove as an [example](#).

Practice

Here are some web links to useful information on NHS practice and digital inclusion projects focused on health.

NHS Digital Inclusion Guide for Health & Social Care, April 2018 [project guide](#)

The guide aims to provide project set up information and good practice examples. Note a consultation is ongoing (January 2019) to revise the guide.

NHS England [guide](#) to using online services for patients can be found [here](#).

Good Things Foundation, [Widening Digital Participation](#) project (phase 1 2013-16 & current phase 2 2017-20)

Detailed information on the different projects can be found [here](#).

The programme involves 20 Pathfinders projects which are under development in phase 2 of the project. There is a partnership approach to the work with a mix of local authorities, NHS, Public Health & voluntary sector organisations involved. The focus of the Pathfinders is varied in scope ranging from working with older people (Age UK Sunderland) through to digital skills for nurses.

The phase 1 learning/evaluation has been published

Good Things Foundation (Tinder), Health & Digital: Reducing Inequalities, Improving Society - An evaluation of the Widening Digital Participation programme. July 2016 [report](#)

Phase 2 developing shared thinking on:

- The 'Trust Gap' – the likelihood of acceptance of health app recommendations: and the contrast between peers & health professionals.

- Pathfinder project reports detailing developing practice.
- Person-centred health support: co-production of services and personalised support

NHS Digital, Digital transformation and working with the VCSE, September 2018
[blog](#)

New York Times, [Online cancer information is often not reliable](#), November 2018

Example GP practices known to be proactive in moving services online

[Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire](#)

Useful background information – supporting digital inclusion and digital transformation

[NHS England Information Standard](#)

[NHS England Accessible Information Standard](#)

[NHS Apps Library](#)

[NHS England Digital Transformation bulletin](#)