

Digital Inclusion

Fiveways PCN Community Engagement Project



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Introduction

As the NHS supports primary care to move towards a digital-first approach, there is the risk that the drive for greater digital access leaves behind those who are unable to engage with technology and therefore deepens existing health inequalities. The needs of digitally excluded residents must be given consideration and embedded within delivery plans.

Staff in Fiveways Primary Care Network are conscious that more services are moving online and want to ensure patients are brought along on that journey and do not feel they must adapt to change without support.

Primary Care Network (PCN) is the collective name for local GP practices that have come together to focus on local patient care. This Fiveways PCN includes the following practices:

- Vassall Medical Centre
- Minet Green Health Practice
- The Corner Surgery
- Herne Hill Road Medical Practice
- Akerman Medical Practice (at the time of the project)



Exterior of Akerman Health Centre.

Aims of the Engagement

In collaboration and with the support of Healthwatch Lambeth, the Fiveways PCN consulted residents by seeking to understand their experiences using digital tools, such as practice websites and the NHS App. We wanted to:

- a. Understand how patients feel about using online services, including practice websites and the NHS app.
- b. Understand the nature of barriers or challenges faced by patients.
- c. Develop strategies to help overcome any challenges identified by patients in accessing online services to manage their healthcare.



Entrance to Minet Green Health Practice.

Methods

Survey of online digital access

To understand how patients feel about online services, we developed a brief survey that could be completed in five minutes. Our survey consisted of questions covering:

- Phone ownership and use
- Access to the internet
- Use of apps
- Experiences of making a GP appointment online
- The patient's preferences for making GP appointments

We took the survey to four GP practice waiting rooms within the PCN and surveyed patients about their Online Access. Practices included:

- Vassall Medical Centre
- Minet Green Health Centre
- The Corner Surgery
- Herne Hill Road Medical Practice

Equity Champions and reception staff worked alongside a Healthwatch Lambeth staff member to approach patients and ask them to complete the survey. In addition to the paper copies, a flyer with a link and QR code to complete the survey online was also available. The same flyer was circulated to social prescribers within Fiveways PCN, who spoke with patients about the survey and encouraged them to respond.

We heard from a total of 66 patients.

- **Almost two-thirds of patients (64%) were women.** Approximately 30% were men and 2% were transgender.
- **The majority (95%) of patients were over 25 years of age.** Just under half (45%) were between 25 and 49 years old, 32% were 50-64 years old, and 18% were over 65 years old.
- **Three-quarters of patients self-described as heterosexual/straight.** 7% self-described as gay and 2% self-described as pansexual.
- In terms of ethnic background:
 - **Just under half (49%) of patients self-described as Black/Black British,** from Black African, Black Caribbean, and other Black backgrounds.

- **Just over a third (37%) self-described as White**, with 21% being from White British backgrounds, 3% being from White Irish, and 13% from other White backgrounds.
- **3% self-described as Asian/Asian British**, from Bangladeshi and other Asian backgrounds.
- **6% were from other backgrounds**, including Latin American and Mixed/multiple ethnic backgrounds.
- Half of respondents had a long-term health condition, and one-quarter of respondents had a disability.
- 16% of respondents were carers.

Digital skills workshops

After listening to patients' feedback about the challenges of using online services, we worked closely with Fiveways PCN and ClearCommunityWeb to provide Digital Skills workshops for patients to improve their skills and confidence in accessing services online. Four workshops were delivered to introduce patients to the NHS app. Patients over 65 were informed about the workshops via text message from their GP practice. The workshops covered:

- How to download the NHS app.
- Use of the app to make appointments and order medication.
- Opportunities to ask questions and raise concerns.

Four workshops were delivered with approximately 40 patients attending, all over the age of 65. During these workshops, patients provided further feedback about the challenges they experienced, as well as providing feedback on the digital skills training they received.

Survey findings on online digital access to services

Smartphone ownership and access to the internet

- Most patients surveyed (93%) owned a smartphone.
- 89% reported having easy access to the internet and 85% felt comfortable using it.

Making the appointment

- 76% had made a telephone call to make an appointment for the date they were surveyed. The majority were over the age of 50.
- 3% used online methods.
- 11% made appointments in person.
- 10% were called in for their appointments because of a concurrent flu vaccine clinic.

Use of apps

- 89% of patients reported knowing how to use apps on their smartphones.
- 92% had access to either the Patient Access app or the NHS app on their phones.
- However, only 60% used online services (Patient Access or NHS app) to manage their healthcare including making appointments, ordering prescriptions, checking their data, and booking blood tests.
- Of those who did not use online services almost two-thirds were over the age of 50.
- Overall, the majority of patients (88%) had no experience using the 'Get help for any health problem page' on their GP website and of these 52% were over the age of 50.
- Just over a quarter (27%) did not have access to either Patient Access or the NHS app. These included people who had trouble downloading apps.

We found that confidence was the greatest barrier for patients when it came to using digital or online options to manage their healthcare. Whilst many patients did have access to phones and the internet and were comfortable using online services, several reported that they had not been confident to take the next step to manage their healthcare online. Several mentioned needing more support to use online services.

Preferences for receiving reminders

- The overwhelming majority of patients (92%) preferred to receive text messages from their GP practice, liking the immediacy of text messages although they acknowledged that those without smartphones would have difficulties accessing links.
- A smaller proportion also reported email as a preferred way of receiving reminders and approximately 15% would be open to app notifications.

Digital Skills Workshops

Drawing on the feedback from patients reported in the above-mentioned survey, we partnered with ClearCommunityWeb to offer digital skills workshops lasting 2.5 hours in various locations around Lambeth. They facilitated 4 workshops for patients from Fiveways PCN aged over 65 with a focus on introducing patients to the NHS App and building their confidence to access different features of the app. During the workshop discussions, we found that patients had mixed confidence about using digital tools such as apps and websites, with this appearing to be a major barrier to managing their healthcare online. Many participants required support to log on to Wi-Fi in the workshop venue.

Most patients (89%) found the workshops to be helpful or very helpful.

Conversations throughout the workshops mirrored these responses as many people wanted to continue their learning and attend future workshops.



“The session was really useful...being able to check my records, book appointments, and anything that helps me get to see a doctor sooner.”



Open-ended responses indicated that patients found features such as access to medical history, booking appointments, and ordering repeat prescriptions particularly useful.

More than half of patients (54%) felt confident or very confident using features of the NHS app after the workshop. Just over one-fifth (23%) did not feel confident and still required support.



“As time goes on, I will try to continue trying to use it.”



Patients also reported on the health and social care topics of particular importance to them. Whilst there were no clear stand-out topic responses included information on the new MyChart app, the new system for booking blood tests, being able to see a doctor face to face, information about cancer, flu jabs, and organ donation. Some mentioned difficulties in getting through to Kings College Hospital.

Patients suggested ways they could be supported to access online health services including:

- Setting up a terminal in the GP practice for patients to test out using the NHS app and its various features with opportunities for further support from practice staff.
- Patients also wanted to know about the difference between requesting an appointment and booking an appointment with most wanting to book rather than request first.

The workshops were a great opportunity for staff to dig deeper as to what the barriers might be and for patients to voice further their concerns and challenges of using online healthcare services.

- People spoke about other challenges they are having with digital services such as the new system to book blood tests.
- Throughout the workshops, patients raised questions about other apps or issues they encountered, in particular, their confusion about the newly introduced MyChart app being used by Kings College Hospital and St Thomas Hospital.



Bulletin board in Minet Green Health Practice.

Next steps and recommendations

The survey findings show that many patients in Fiveways PCN do have access to smartphones and the internet, however many do not have the confidence to use these tools to coordinate their healthcare.

Opportunities exist for PCNs and practice staff to continue to support patients as more services move online:

- The success of the digital skills workshops shows that patients do have a desire to learn new skills that enable them to use online services. Practices can encourage patients and refer them to digital skills courses available in their local area. Practices could also host sessions in their waiting areas that would be easily accessible to their patients.
- Support Patients to set up their NHS accounts and download the NHS App. For example, some practices are now offering drop-in or a 1:1 session with a staff member.
- PCN staff are encouraged to seek patient advice about how they can be supported to embrace digital tools as they are rolled out in their practices.
- We encourage practices to always have an option available for patients who cannot access services online.
- We remind practices that many NHS online services are only available in English and therefore those who do not speak English are at a double disadvantage. Consider ways you can support this group of patients within your practices.



Waiting room in Herne Hill Road Medical Practice.



healthwatch
Lambeth

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