

Digital access to healthcare

Patient experience of using digital access systems
March 2026

Background

In our Annual Survey, we asked people to choose from a list of work priorities. GP access came out as one of the top three choices. We have heard regular feedback about digital healthcare systems, in particular GP digital systems. Much of the feedback received centres around the increases in difficulties in accessing telephone triage but being unable to access online help. This may be due to either not being online, being unaware of how to use relevant online systems or not having the right technology, for example, smart phones.

Some feedback has been around surgeries not offering support or help to patients on how to use online systems and an increasing amount of feedback has focussed on patients feeling that surgeries are 'pushing' online options as the only option rather than an alternative.

Others have given feedback around digital systems being non-user friendly due to the number or complexity of questions and delays in response for online requests to be reviewed or actioned.

To find out more we devised a simple survey to ask people the main positives about using online systems for GP healthcare as well as the main barriers. The survey was not a widespread public survey due to the potential for bias in gathering feedback mainly from those who were already online. We instead asked for public feedback during our regular engagement events in the summer and autumn of 2025.

Who we heard from

We received 66 responses. We heard from people across the county with the majority (50%) being from the North Northumberland area. All people who gave demographic information identified as White British and most (45%) were aged 65-79. 56% told us they had a disability or long-term health condition. Just under half the people we heard from used online systems to seek health advice from GP or book an appointment, whilst the remainder had not.

What we heard

We asked people if they had any particularly good or bad experiences of using online services. Feedback on these experiences alongside other comments received throughout the survey have been grouped together into emerging themes.

Choice of how to contact GP

For most people who did not use online services the reason given was that they prefer to contact their GP by telephone, or in person, rather than use online services. Several people who did use online services also told us that they would prefer to contact their GP on the telephone, or in person, and this was the reason they least liked using online services.

Reasons for this preference varied from not wanting to go online or not being online -

"I would not want to go online, I feel I am too old (80s) to learn those skills now and would not want to."

- or not having a suitable device/limited Wi-Fi or reception to those who simply preferred the option of speaking to a person:

"I prefer to talk to people in person and dislike that services are becoming faceless".

Some who were not online told us they had to rely on family or friends to help them -

"I don't do modern technology my daughter in law goes online for me if I need it".

We heard from some who mentioned either not having another choice of how to contact their GP other than going online or that they felt 'pushed' into going online -

"Would have liked some help with online services but have managed to do it now. Feel that this is only option as often pushed if ring up."

Conversely, and fewer in number, a couple of patients told us that they did not know of an 'online' option to contact their GP.

"I use NHS app a lot for prescriptions but can't book appointments through it. I don't know of another system to book appointments through so just ring or go in person."

Barriers to accessing online services

Again, we heard from a number of people who chose the primary reason for not using online systems as not having the technical skills or confidence to use them or that they had unsuitable devices or limited reception/Wi-Fi to enable them to access online services.

However, just under 30% told us that if support was available from their GP surgery or a local community service to show them how to use digital healthcare services, they would use this support. This shows that for some people the barriers to accessing online services could be removed, or at least reduced, by getting guidance and support.

We heard from several people that online services were not suitable due to their specific health issues such as sight loss or memory loss -

"I have issues with memory (awaiting diagnosis) so find online services difficult as I can't remember what I am doing or have done."

"Because of sight loss I find contacting GP online difficult as I keep the pressing wrong thing."

We also heard from some people that their GPs online system could be complicated to use, be too time consuming or ask too many irrelevant questions.

"Usually get logged out and unsure how to use. On occasion had used was logged out and needed something from GP surgery to get back in so just ring now instead."

"The questions asked are often irrelevant and it takes ages to complete before you get to the service you require."

Concerns around misdiagnosis or unsuitable treatment

Some mentioned they were concerned they may miss important information when going online or that the medical problem would not be clear or would not be explained fully leading to incomplete treatment or diagnosis -

"The language that is used is not explicit. I find it difficult to follow. I am afraid to miss important information or appointments."

"Managed to take a photo of my arm and sent it to GP. But I was very anxious in case I made a mistake or it would not show the problem."

Positives of using online systems

For those who did use online systems the greatest positive people told us about was the speed and/or convenience of getting help and accessing information about their health records such as blood test results or ordering prescriptions. Some people also mentioned the benefits of being able to view appointment times and dates and get reminders.

"I like the NHS (App) as it tells me when my appointments are and reminds me."

"I have liked how quickly I get a response this way, especially as it has always been for my daughters who are young."

A few others mentioned that due to their health conditions going online was preferable for them -

"Due to a stroke I had my vocabulary is non verbal. So for me the online system works well."

Good practice case studies

Northumbria Primary Care completed widespread patient engagement about their online system 'Anima' in October 2024 after hearing patient concerns including problems logging onto the site, complexity of questions and some longer than desirable waits for responses. Following patient feedback they decided to move to systemConnect, a more straightforward system being a less complex form which did not require a password.

Practices were keen to help patients to understand the new system. Most surgeries offered drop-in sessions to guide patients through the system and answer any queries. Whilst the offer of technical help is ongoing to patients, they have recognised that patients should still have the choice of how to access their surgery so are working to make it clear that patients can still go in person or telephone to access help.

Some patient feedback we received was positive about the change

"The online system is easier than it used to be (changed from Anima to systemConnect) so will use this in future. Have had to get a little guidance from GP surgery as to what to do."

"The old system used to be a lot more complicated with lots of questions that were not needed but thankfully seems to have got better now."

Haltwhistle Medical Group regularly organises support for digital access via drop-ins for patients and have an open invitation for patients to contact them for digital support on the NHS app. Support focuses on how to download the NHS app, how it works and how to use it. Sessions run frequently and are promoted via local groups, church halls and on social media.

Whilst many patients initially struggle with the downloading of the app and linking it to the GP system to book appointments once registered, they have had very positive feedback on the benefits such as getting test results, reminder text messages and ordering prescriptions. These benefits are used to help promote the app to patients and promotion is a whole team effort. However, the surgery is very keen to ensure there are other options for patients who do not, or cannot, go online and therefore continue to promote all options for access including telephone and face to face triage.



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