

The digital divide: online access to GP services

Access to GP services is increasingly through online channels – the NHS App or the GP practice website – but how accessible is this for everyone? The use of AI (artificial intelligence) in general practice is also growing, but how do people really feel about the use of this sort of technology to assist them when dealing with general practice?

What did we do?



106 Surrey residents spoke to us at our community engagement events or responded to our survey. We were particularly interested in hearing from people from black and Asian minoritised communities, those living in areas of deprivation and those from multiple generations in Surrey Heath, Surrey Downs and North West Surrey.



What did we find?

How do people interact with their GP practice?



- **56%** of the people we spoke to access their GP services online via their **GP practice website**; **38%** of people accessed their GP services online via the **NHS App** (please note: latest data from the [GP Patient Survey](#) found that only 28% of people in the areas of Surrey covered by Surrey Heartlands Integrated Care System contacted their GP practice online (using the practice website) last time they contacted the practice, suggesting our survey reached more digitally included residents than the Surrey average).
- The most common healthcare service accessed online is requesting **repeat prescriptions** (**58%**), followed by receiving messages from the GP practice (51%), managing upcoming appointments and getting test results (both 44%).

The value of online

- **51%** of people said that they found it **easy or very easy** to access healthcare services from their **GP practice online**.
- People cited not having to wait in a telephone queue and the ability to choose appointment slots to suit them (though these were sometimes limited) as reasons for preferring this method and felt that their GP practice were generally responsive (though this varied from practice to practice).
- People with hearing difficulties commented that the online form was more helpful for them than the phone or in person.

Online limitations

- It was recognised that it would be difficult for people with basic literacy skills (10% of people said “I don’t have the skills or knowledge” to use online access) and/or no internet access (6% said, “I don’t have a device”). Some said that the reception staff would assist them if they needed help completing the form or needed to see someone urgently.



“I have a neuro condition which affects cognitive ability when tired or stressed. Despite a lifetime of running companies, when your brain dies, you can’t even work out what a mouse is. I am not elderly, I am resourceful and intelligent, yet I have been left unable to get help because my brain can’t work out what a mouse or phone is for.”

Mole Valley resident



We asked, “**What would make it easier for you to access GP services online?**”, people said:

- ✓ Make the **online form** available **24/7**
- ✓ Make **more appointments** available
- ✓ Provide **skills tutorials/explanation** of how to use the online tools
- ✓ **Simplify** the online form and provide a free text box
- ✓ **Streamline** the number of Apps in use or, at least, ensure that they “talk” to each other.
- ✓ Provide the **ability to speak** to someone in person if necessary.

People told us that they would like to be able to do the following online more easily:

- ✓ Better access to their medical records (without having data masked).
- ✓ Easier access to linked accounts as a parent or carer.
- ✓ The ability to book routine tests online, such as blood and smear tests.

How would people like to make an appointment?



- Almost two thirds (**63%**) of people normally make an appointment with their GP practice online, **47%** use the phone and **13%** do it in person.



- However, when asked if this is how they *prefer* to make an appointment less than half (**47%**) chose online. **58%** chose the phone and **18%** chose in person.



"It suits me to do it online for my mother but, if she didn't have me, she wouldn't do it. She is anxious about speaking to people as she only understands basic English. She simply would not bother to get her health needs addressed. She'd wait until they had to bring her out in an ambulance."

Daughter talking for mother, Guildford resident



- Some people told us that they resort to using the phone as the online form is not always available (**32%** said this was a barrier to booking online).*



"I would want to use the phone if it was urgent. If it was "body maintenance", I would use Rapid Health."

Ash resident



- People reported that they felt **pressurised by their GP practice** to make an appointment online; some said that they found completing the online form time consuming, saying that there seem to be a lot of questions but that these do not always allow them to say what they felt they needed to.
- Others said that they knew to use "**buzz words**" to encourage the triage system to give them an appointment, otherwise they would have to wait weeks.



"I am trying to use the online system but it's clunky. You have to over exaggerate your symptoms to get an appointment. I had 100 day cough in October and still had it in March so tried to make an appointment online but the system said I didn't need an appointment or to see the doctor. I wasn't sleeping because of the cough, I was exhausted. If you use buzz words like anxiety and depression, you will get an appointment. Getting seen relies on you knowing this which makes the system elitist."

Mole Valley resident



* This survey was conducted before the latest [Government guidance](#) on appointment requests was issued.



Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

We asked, "How happy or unhappy would you be for AI to be used to carry out healthcare services within your GP practice?"

✓ Happy	✗ Unhappy
To answer non health related questions	To carry out routine screening/testing for low risk conditions
To assist patients writing online requests for appointments	To assess health needs on booking an appointment
To write up medical records following GP consultation	To answer health related frequently asked questions

The main concerns were a lack of trust in a relatively new technology, concern about the quality of the data informing AI and the lack of/preference for human interaction.