

Digital Exclusions and the Impact on Health Inequalities

Report of Patient Responses

September 2022

1. Introduction

The existing literature on digital exclusion suggests that improving digital skills can help to reduce social isolation and depression, although further research is needed. As health information and services being delivered digitally has seen a recent increase, the ability to use digital technologies is increasingly a form of health literacy. The World Health Organisation have evidenced that people with lower health literacy have worse health outcomes.

Research for the [UK digital strategy](#) suggests that there are a number of important barriers, and more than one may affect individuals at any one time. They include:

- Access – not everyone has the ability to connect to the internet
- Skills – not everybody has the ability to use the internet and online services
- Confidence – some people fear online crime, lack trust or don't know where to start online
- Motivation – not everybody wants to use digital services. They may feel they aren't relevant or helpful

The aim of this East PCN project is to find out how many people are struggling to access health services or care and support because they are not confident in using technology. East PCN would like to ensure equality for the population in the area in terms of digital access to health care services. By reaching out to patients of East PCN, we would like to find out what barriers people experience so that we can achieve the following:

- Health and digital literacy improvement
- Encouraging use of digital technology
- Inhouse and health care support for using digital services
- Increase the use of apps to empower patients to manage their health conditions digitally where and when appropriate to do so
- Increase the use of the NHS App to reduce waiting times for patients via the telephone

2. Methodology

To assess the current status of digital inclusivity across the Warrington East PCN, Birchwood Medical Centre, Padgate Medical Centre and Fearnhead Cross Medical Centre. The initial questionnaire was provided by the PCN Strategic Manager for Central East, East and South Warrington PCNs.

The questionnaire asked patient participants about their experiences with web or app-based health tools and services including eConsult, video consultations and using the NHS App. The final question offered participants an opportunity to access support from a digital champion, providing one to one support with online services they required help with.

Warrington Voluntary Action (WVA) recruited, trained and coordinated a group of 10 volunteers to engage with patients and carry out the surveys. The volunteers were supported throughout this activity via a WVA team member, providing them with the opportunity to ask questions and raise any concerns. This activity was carried out during August, which did result in some volunteers stepping down due to holidays and other commitments. However, there was a core group of 6 volunteers. The volunteers were instrumental in seeking patient views in a wide range of accessible locations, specifically focusing on locations with a greater footfall, to ensure a diverse range of viewpoints. Engagements included:

- Fearnhead Community Centre
- Wellbeing Brunch
- Warrington Food Pantry
- Thomas Risley Church – coffee morning
- Birchwood Community Centre – Birchwood Chats event
- LifeTime
- Birchwood Shopping Centre
- Padgate Library
- Birchwood The Bread-and-Butter Thing
- Birchwood Library
- Birchwood Shopping Centre
- Padgate GP Surgery
- Fearnhead GP surgery
- Birchwood GP surgery

Volunteers included older people, including a retired paediatrician, male, females and BAME.

3. Demographics

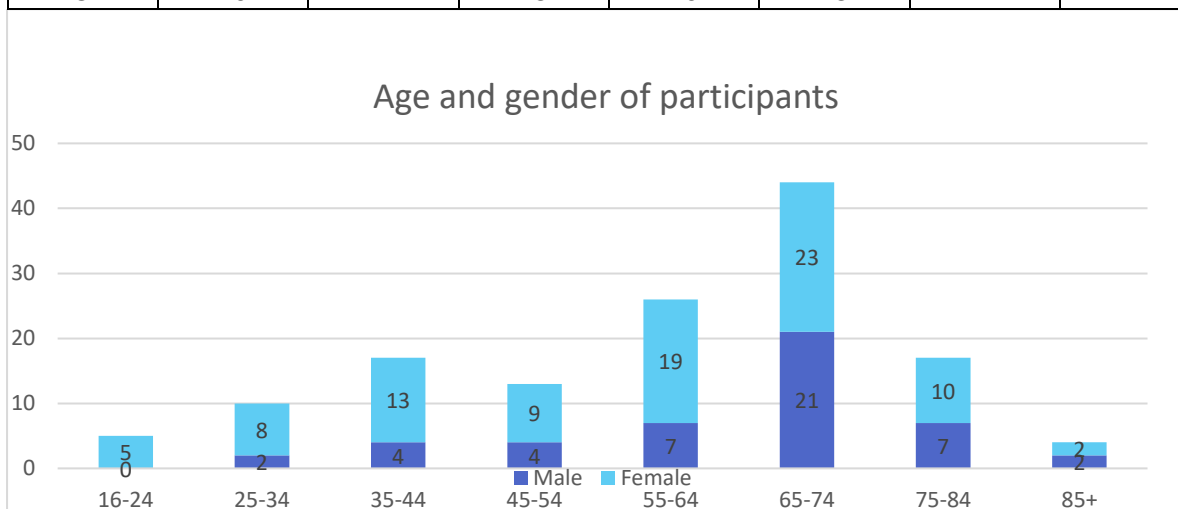
In total, 135 survey respondents completed the questionnaire face to face with volunteers.

The volunteers also surveyed an additional 29 residents from the three areas. However, this data has not been used as they were registered with other GPs.

GP Surgeries		
Birchwood	Fearnhead	Padgate
77	38	20

Gender	
Male	Female
45	90

Age							
16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75-84	85+
5	10	17	13	26	43	17	4



Ethnicity			
White	Black	Asian	Other
128	4	2	1

Disability				
Long term health condition	Physical impairment	Hearing impairment	Visual impairment	Mental health illness
49	15	8	5	10
Learning disability	Social/behavioural problems	Prefer not to say	No	Other
2	3	6	56	27

Other – Included arthritis, asthma, blood pressure problems, diabetes, epilepsy, sleep apnoea, high cholesterol, under/over-active thyroid, leaky heart valves, macular degeneration, spondylitis

4. Questionnaire Responses

Q1 – Do you have access to the internet?

Yes – 125

No – 9

Sometimes – 1

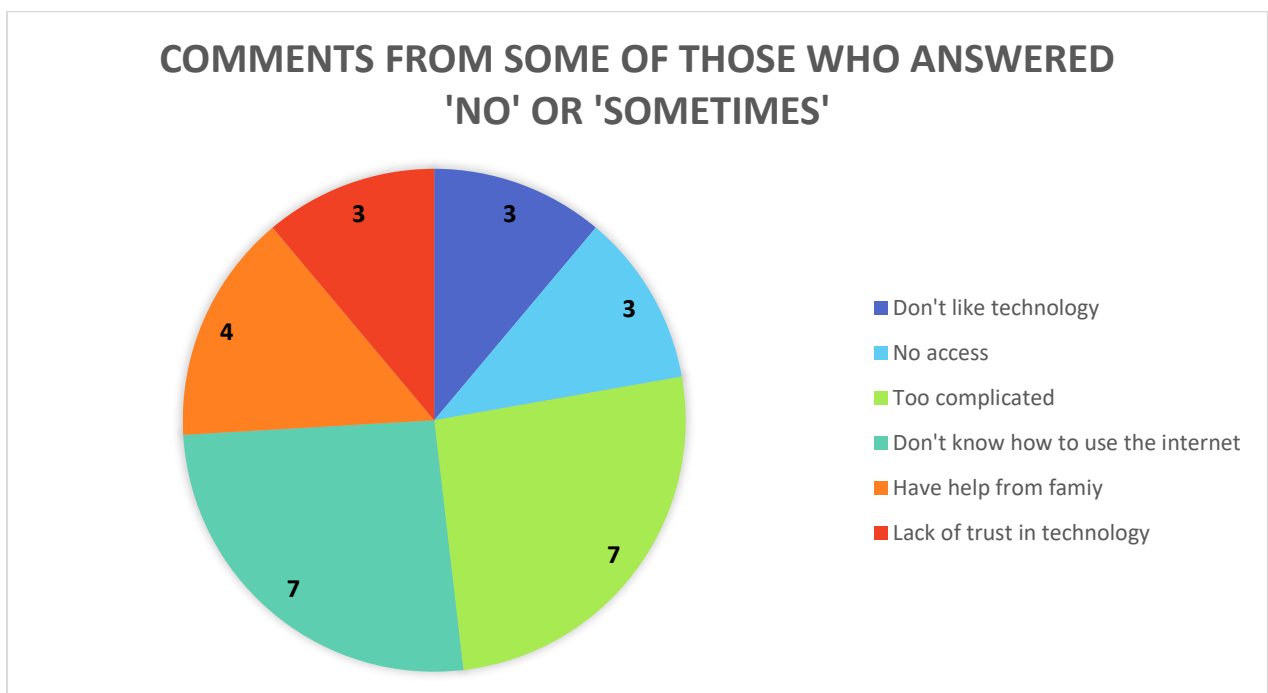
Comments – Five of those who said they do have access also commented that they don't tend to use it for reasons such as it being too complicated, they don't know how to or they don't want to

Q2 – Do you feel confident accessing the internet to find information?

Yes – 95

No – 23

Sometimes – 17

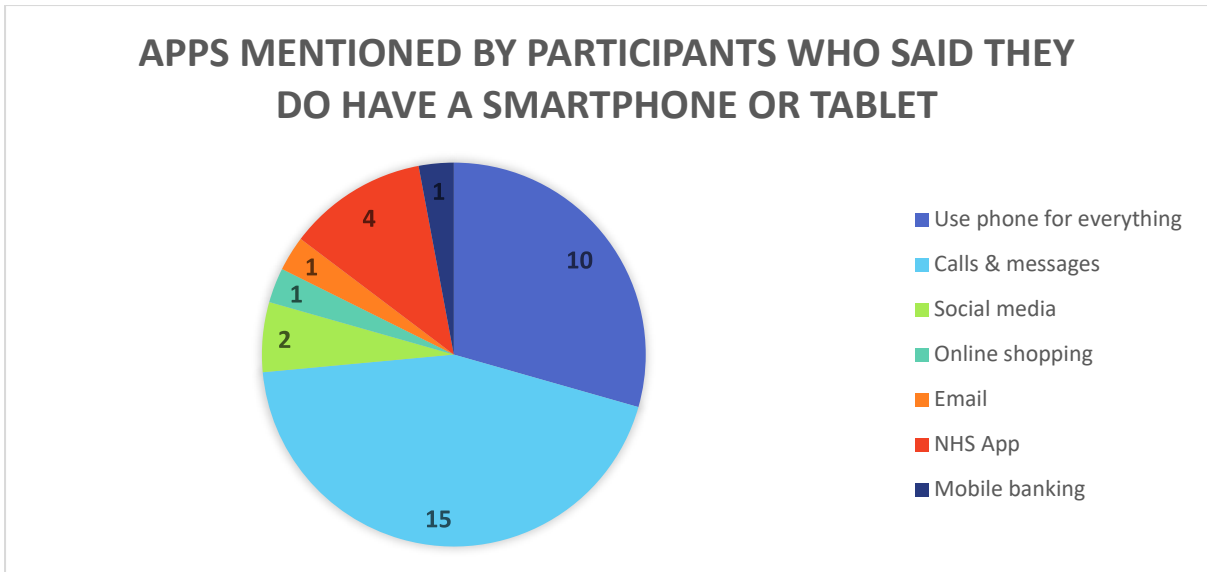


Q3 – Do you have a smartphone or tablet?

Yes – 123

No – 11

Sometimes – 1



Out of the 11 people who said they don't have a smartphone or tablet, they commented saying they didn't need or want to use one, or wouldn't know how to use one. They also mentioned concerns over security or hesitancy with technology.

Q4 – Would you like to, or have you already accessed health and care information?

- Yes – 90
- I would like to – 3
- No – 42

Comments from some of those who answered 'no' mentioned that they haven't felt like they've needed to, would ask a family member to do it for them, would phone their GP or are worried they would read bad news, or they wouldn't know how to go about accessing the information.

Q5 – Would you like to, or have you already accessed eConsult?

- Yes – 75
- No – 56
- Sometimes – 4

Some of those who answered 'yes' or 'sometimes' commented that the form is quite long, repetitive and complicated. Some find it easier to phone their GP

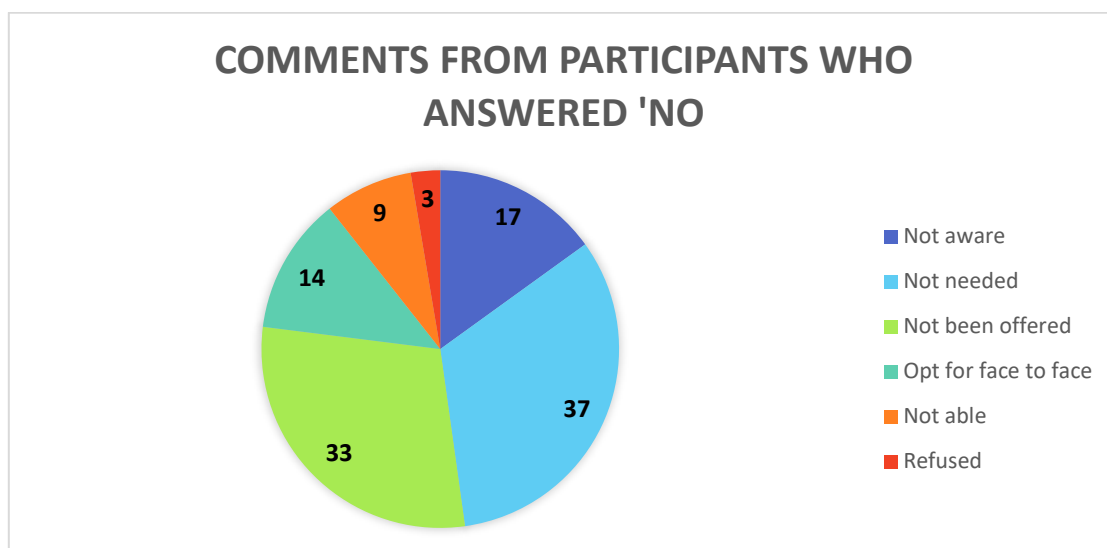
Some of those who answered 'no' mostly commented that they haven't needed to use eConsult. Others mentioned they felt it is easier to go face to face and speak to someone, they have family to do it for them, they are not aware of eConsult or they aren't confident or lack trust with technology.

Q6 – Would you like to or have you already accessed GP appointments via online video link (Zoom, WhatsApp video, FaceTime, AccuRx)

Yes – 18

No – 116

Sometimes – 1



Q7 – Would you like to, or have you accessed technology or online services to monitor your health conditions?

Yes – 55

No – 80

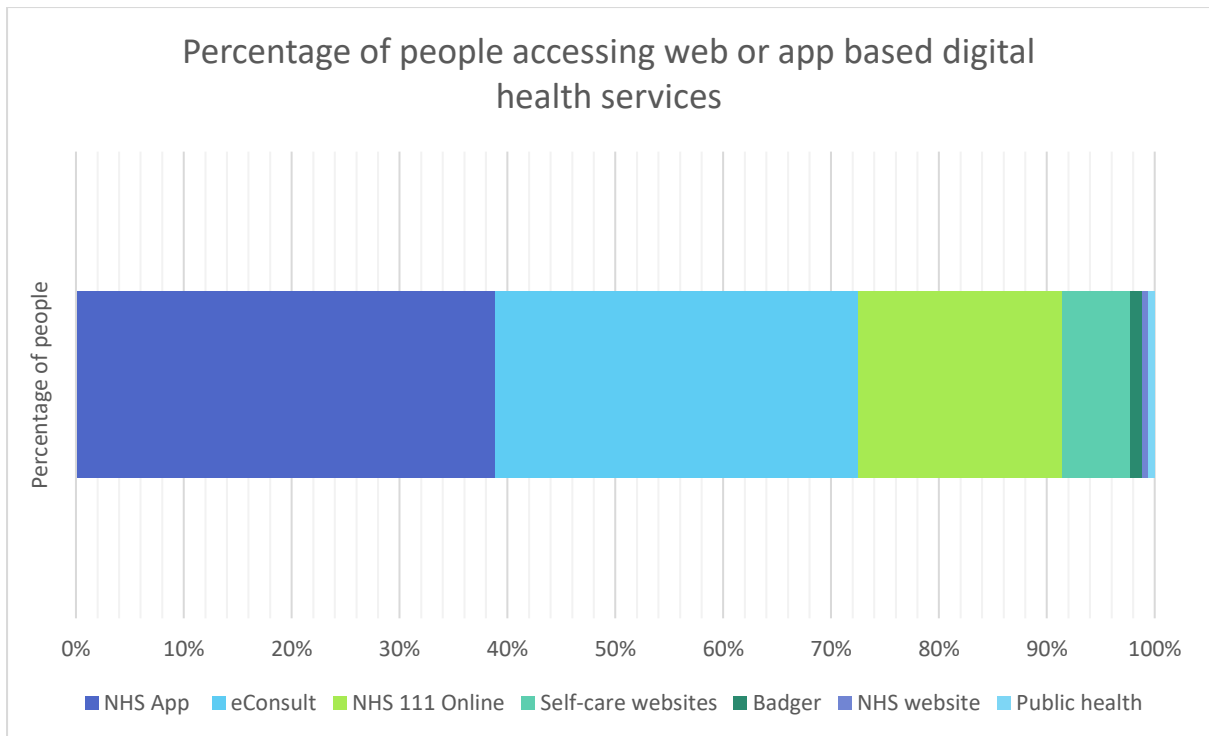
Out of those who answered 'no', the majority of participants have said they have not needed to monitor any conditions. Some mentioned that they did not have the facilities to do so, would like to but aren't sure how, that it is too complicated to do or it is their personal choice.

Q8 – Would you like to, or have you already accessed a web or app-based tool to access local health services, e.g. Happy Ok Sad website, NHS App/Patient Access (e.g. ordering repeat prescriptions), Warrington Borough Council website (public health)

Yes – 93

No – 42

Most who said 'yes' mentioned NHS app. Other web or app-based tools mentioned include Happy Ok Sad, WBC Public Health, Covid tracking app, NHS website, Badger pregnancy monitoring



Those who answered 'no' either mentioned that they weren't aware of these services, had no access to them, did not feel confident using or would go and ask at their GP surgery face to face if they had any enquiries

Q9 – Have you accessed any health services digitally? (e.g. eConsult, Video consultations, NHS app/Patient Access, self-care websites, NHS 111 online etc.)

Yes – 96

No – 39

Most who said yes mentioned accessing the NHS App, using eConsult, NHS 111 Online. A few also mentioned using self-care websites and video consultations. Those who said no mentioned a lack of access, confidence or that they haven't needed to

Q10 – Would you like to receive support from a digital champion to increase your access, skills, confidence or motivation when accessing health services? If yes, please leave your contact details

Yes – 8

No – 127

6. Data Notes:

Extrapolating the data highlights that of the respondents that haven't accessed GP or health care services digitally for whatever reason be that family support, ability, access or merely the preference for face-to-face information or support, 21 were male of which 80% of those are over 55, 66% are over 65 and 23% are over 75. Of the 28 females 85% of those are over 55 / 60% are over 65 / 21% are over 75.

Respondents with a learning difficulty stated accessing support from family members. The sample size from the survey was too small to use this data.

5. Conclusion

The data highlights that the majority of participants were female, wider evidence from previous work delivered via WVA indicated that elderly men were more likely to be digitally excluded. Given more time, the volunteers could have targeted more males to ascertain male support needs particularly those over 60. The data does indicate a greater need of support for those over 55 in both males and female. Excluding, the GP setting the volunteer researchers found interviewing men more difficult as men are less to be in attendance at community activities or at shopping centres. **This highlights there is a clear need to support older patients, in particular men.**

Although, only 8 participants stated they required support at the point of interview, almost 45% highlighted that they haven't accessed healthcare services digitally due to confidence, lack of access or not needing to. This correlates with many of the other responses stating they would prefer to have a face-to-face meeting with the GP, it was too complicated etc. Had the patients not been given the option of face to face they would most certainly need support to access digital health care.

Only 4.5% of the respondents were from an ethnic minority, this figure is not representative of Warrington as whole, however this figure may be representative of the patient population for the East PCN. It is also likely that people from ethnic minorities may not have been in the community venues utilised via the volunteers. **More support to engage with people whose first language is not English would be a positive step forward, to identify preferred ways of developing a digital support offer.**

It is possible to speculate that some of the respondents of the questionnaire are not aware of the full functionality of some of the online health services available. For example, they might have known they can order their repeat prescription through the NHS App but didn't realise they could access test results.

A comment and frustration from the volunteers included that it was difficult to find places in the community (excluding in the GP surgeries) where they could find patients of Birchwood Medical Centre, Padgate Medical Centre and Fearnhead Cross Medical Centre.

During the collection of responses, it was found that the most successful place for volunteers to engage with participants was in the waiting rooms of the GP surgeries. As people were already there waiting to be called in. Generally, they seemed happy to have a conversation with a volunteer in the meantime. Any further development of the project should consider offering support and advice though the surgery, having a fully trained volunteer/s available to the GP surgery. **Future digital support should be promoted/referred directly through the GP practice to a digital volunteer.**

Anecdotal evidence showed that participants seemed frustrated with some online services due to previous bad experience. One participant described a situation where they used NHS 111 online and was told to go to their GP surgery and their GP surgery told them to use 111.

For further additional information related to the volunteer coordination and survey results please contact Shaylah Cullen shaylah@warringtonva.org.uk