



A review of digital access to health and care 2020–2024

February 2025

Contact – Dr Lester Coleman

Lester@healthwatchbrightonandhove.co.uk

healthwatch
Brighton and Hove

A review of digital access to health and care 2020–2024 – Healthwatch Brighton and Hove

Context:

Healthwatch Brighton and Hove developed an interest in digital technology (text, email, going online for appointments) given the dramatic shift to digital GP access since the Covid-19 pandemic.

We know that certain people are less likely to use digital technology and could face disadvantage, for example by being unable to book GP appointments online. These groups include:

- [Older people.](#)
- [People whose first language is not English.](#)
- Those with [no formal qualifications.](#)

Within [Brighton and Hove](#), 8.6% of the adult population have never used the internet or have not used it in the last three months, and 16% of the adult population lack the five basic digital skills (managing information, communicating, transacting, problem-solving, and creating).

Relevant Healthwatch reports:

Below we summarise projects where we have examined digital technology as a means of accessing and holding appointments with health and care professionals.

[Accessing health and care services – findings during the Coronavirus pandemic \(2020\)](#): From a survey completed by 2185 people, this established people's experiences of digital or remote consultations during the COVID-19 period and their expectations and preferences for service redesign and delivery in the restore and recovery stages post COVID. For those that had phone, video and online appointments during the pandemic, satisfaction levels were high.

However, the results also show that people with disabilities were less happy to have any form of remote appointment compared to people without disabilities. Older people also showed a stronger preference to having face-to-face appointments with their GP. Younger people were happier to have a phone or video appointment with their GP.

[Accessing health and care services – Interviews with 104 respondents \(2020\)](#): Following the above survey, we spoke to people in more detail through a series of

phone interviews. Two-thirds of the people who had experienced a remote appointment found the experience to be a positive one. Reasons given for a positive experience included less travel, less time in the waiting room and being able to get a quicker appointment.

For those with a less positive experience, reasons included not having a specific time for the appointment and generally not feeling able, or feeling too rushed, to fully explain their condition in a remote setting. Technological challenges and wasting time for an initial phone call when the need for a face-to-face appointment was obvious, were other concerns.

Face-to-face appointments were seen to be important for physical examinations (e.g. tests, seeing how a patient moved, checking a skin condition) and matters of a personal, private or emotional nature. People with complex physical needs and mental health issues were more likely to favour face-to-face appointments, as their conditions were considered more complicated and needed the sensitivity of an in-person appointment.

[Digital exclusion – briefing report \(2021\)](#): This report looks at the different definitions of digital exclusion, why people are digitally excluded, why is it important, and the extent of digital exclusion both nationally and locally. At the time of the review, it was estimated 8.6% of adult population in Brighton and Hove have never used the internet or have not used it within the last three months. It also contains evidence that there are 15 GP surgeries where less than 30% of patients are using online services – three of these are either in the fourth or fifth quintile for older people. It also looks at local efforts to increase digital inclusion. The review uses evidence from the Lloyd’s Bank [Consumer Digital Index](#) and the [Good Things Foundation](#).

[People’s views about remote access to appointments during the Covid-19 pandemic – compilation of evidence \(2021\)](#): This review includes evidence from 28 studies since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the main conclusions of the report is the preference towards a hybrid system of appointments including text, phone, video, email and in-person appointments.

[Typologies of digital exclusion - A Healthwatch report \(2022\)](#): We spoke to 20 people who had ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’ internet skills. This study showed that the context of use was an important part of digital exclusion, with some people happy to use the internet for some purposes but less so for health and care appointments.

[Patient opinion in East and Central Brighton Primary Care Network/PCN \(2022\)](#): A total of 1,845 people within this PCN responded to an online survey about screening, community services and use of online technology for making

appointments. The report found that the majority of people (56%) had not used an online booking form to make an appointment with their GP, with over one-half of these using it for the first time since the Covid-19 pandemic. The main reason for not using the online booking system was being unaware that such a service was available. People also stated a preference to speak to someone rather than going online. This opposition to online booking appears to be an issue of personal preference rather than people lacking the technology and skills. There were, however, mixed views about online booking with some seeing this as more convenient to a face-to-face visit.

[Access to GP appointments across Sussex – public opinion \(2023\)](#): A total of 851 people responded to an online survey. The survey found that hybrid appointments (remote and face-to-face when needed) are the most appealing option for GP patients. However, around 1 in 6 people objected to all remote options and preferred exclusively face-to-face appointments.

Compared to an [earlier survey in 2020](#), a greater proportion of people showed some criticism towards remote GP appointments – more agreeing that *'only having phone or video appointments with my GP would put me off from getting support'* and less agreeing that *'I think you can get just as much advice from a GP by phone or video compared to a face-to-face'*.

[Understanding the use and attitudes of digital technology among ethnic minority elders in Brighton and Hove \(2024\)](#): 22 people, all aged over 65, shared their views and experiences surrounding digital technology. The study showed concerns over trust, difficulties accessing GPs online or holding online appointments, and language barriers. People stated a need for support in using digital technology. This would preferably be step-by-step, not too fast-paced and held in community venues with support led by members of that same community.

[Patients' views about Woodingdean Medical Centre \(2024\)](#): As a result of patients raising concerns over making GP appointments at Woodingdean Medical Centre, Healthwatch Brighton and Hove undertook a survey with assistance from the practice. A total of 1,129 people completed the survey – mostly online supplemented by some paper copies.

Findings included: people showing preference for phone appointments to reduce waiting times, e-Consult being rarely used (with older people being the least likely). People with disabilities found e-Consult more difficult to use. However, of those who have used e-Consult, a greater proportion found it easy to use compared to those reporting difficulties.

[Experiences of using e-Consult \(2024\)](#): The three Healthwatch teams in Sussex sought people's experiences of using e-Consult, as part of their 6-question poll series. 205 people from across Sussex shared their views, including 29 from Brighton and Hove. Findings were mixed. For example, 35% said e-Consult made managing their health 'Easier/Better', but 29% said it made it 'Harder/Worse' and 26% said it made managing their health 'About the same'. The most common change people wanted was to make e-Consult quicker, simpler and easier for users to complete.

Digital and Data review (2024): We reviewed 14 studies published within the last 2 years. We found many had positive experiences with using the NHS App, although there were problems with language and interpretation of results. There was a strong preference for one system where all health and care information could be held. Many people showed preference towards having phone and other forms of remote appointments with their GP. Nonetheless, a sizeable proportion of people preferred face-to-face appointments, with digital technologies not being seen as a replacement for traditional services.

We have continually sought to gather people's opinions of digital access to health and care since the growth in use following the Covid-19 pandemic. We are aware attitudes are likely to shift through time and this paper serves as a benchmark for further work we continue in this area. For more information about local organisations that are helping to increase digital inclusion, contact [Digital Brighton and Hove](#).