

GP Online Triage: Patient Feedback Report

July 2025



“There is an ongoing pressure to use digital services. There is pressure on family members to bear the load. I don't mind, but it means my parents lose their independence in such things. They don't have mobiles. As they lose independence they have less interest in health.”

Introduction

As part of the 10-year Health Plan the government has set out three key principles: hospital to community; analogue to digital; and sickness to prevention. With the focus on a move to digital transformation we have seen many Warwickshire GP surgeries implement an online triage system. While these systems can be highly effective and are valued by many patients, our engagement has revealed significant barriers for others. This report presents patient feedback heard from Warwickshire residents over the last nine months, highlighting the need for services and commissioners to address these barriers to prevent widening health inequalities.

Benefits of Online Triage

Throughout Warwickshire we heard from people who value being able to contact their GP via an online triage system. This was particularly evident during our recent engagement with young people, specifically those who are not comfortable with making phone calls. When the service works well for patients, we hear about how it is convenient and connects people to the correct professional when they need them.

“It is easy to use the online consultation portal. I was called in 48hrs and had a telephone consultation.”

“They have an online booking system, and it is quick to call you back. This works well for me.”

“Really happy with the online service, I sent a query and received a reply within a few hours. Having the physiotherapist on site is helpful.”

“I filled in the online form at 3.30pm and by 5.30pm my tablets were delivered by Pharmacy to my Door. That is excellent care.”

“GP uses an online platform for sharing information to book appointments and will get back to you in a couple of days with a choice of appointments and practitioners. They have started having a form for children now and you have the option to phone up too.”

Barriers caused by Online Triage

Some people told us that they are able to use the online system but find the options on the online form do not meet their specific needs.

“I am triaged through the online system; it asks me questions but there is no option to ask for a PSA test.”

“For myself I found it difficult to access healthcare for menopause. The online system is great for urgent appointments or for regular care, but I didn't know which box to tick for what I needed.”

“To make an appointment you have to go online, you can't speak to anybody. It was difficult as their young child was ill and began to deteriorate and they needed to speak to someone - they had an appointment booked for later in the day but needed advice now. They were going crazy and just needed to talk to a person for reassurance. These are young new parents and needed someone to speak to. In the end they went physically to the surgery.”

We heard from those who are unfamiliar with the technology and lack the confidence or skills to use online services.

“I don't know how to get into the doctors. It might be my own ignorance as to how to get on the app or how the system works. They are always lovely when you go in, but I am put off trying because I am put off by the process. I will have to call in and ask reception to help me, but I don't like the way that they look at you because 'we do this online now'. I wish there was a step-by-step guide.”

“We phone up and are told to fill in a form online. I don’t want to do that. If I’m lucky I will get a call back but even then you have to sit there waiting by the phone for it to call (individual only has access to a landline) I am on the internet but I’m very wary of it.”

“Surgery changed their appointment system which is fine for me but not for my mum. Mum goes to surgery to book appointments and she keeps being encouraged to use the online system. In her 70s, mum cannot and is unwilling to learn how to book appointments online. She doesn’t have a smartphone and is reliant on us, her children, to book appointments for her which we don’t always have the time to do due to being busy with our own lives. Not everyone is tech savvy. Not everyone has a phone.”

“I have to do everything online and it is hard for my age group. I am waiting for a cataract operation and the appointment was cancelled. I got a phone text telling me to fill in an online form but the email verification has timed out, so it won’t let me in. I’m worried they will think I’ve not got back to them.”

People feel frustrated by their inability to master the system or feel discriminated against as the technology is not accessible for them. Some people told us that this puts them off seeking medical treatment contributing to worsening health.

“They keep telling you to use online service, but Asian community doesn’t know how to do this and doesn’t want to learn. Online system is very bad. I now suffer for weeks before contacting the surgery which makes my health worse.”

“I don’t like having to do the online form because I don’t know how to word things. It is hard to get the meaning across. I prefer a phone call; it is quick and simple. It can be frustrating when you call up and people tell you to go online. I see older people going in and being told to go online, but it is sad to see that they can’t figure it out.”

“It is hard if you are not on the internet. I’m dyslexic and can’t type in what I want to say on the form.”

“I find it hard to get a doctor's appointment now, I think it will only get worse. I can only go when I am not working. I have ADHD so can't remember passwords or times to call/log in.”

“I can't access services - all things have to go through the GP and I'm not online. Even when I got someone to fill in the online form for me there were no appointments available. The doctors tell me to go online when I call up, so I feel that I am in the way. I am 75, my life is nearly over - that is how they treat you.”

“I am a support worker for people with autism and SEND. I care for someone who can't read well enough to use online services. You phone up the GP and it tells you to “Go on the app,” so she puts the phone down. She had a severe mental health issue and did phone the doctor, but was told please use the app. She needs to speak to a person. I go in person to make her appointment. It might make life easier for the surgery but not for individuals.”

“She is 10 weeks pregnant and trying to register herself and her children. Admin staff keep telling her to register online but she can't read and write.”

“I am concerned for my elderly parents who can't go online so can't use the GP. If you phone up you have to press buttons, follow instructions and they couldn't face going through the system. If you call up you have to go through the online system and my Dad spent too long putting it off and ended up in hospital for four days with a kidney infection. My Mum has early stages of dementia and can't understand why her brain isn't working, she couldn't get a urine test at the pharmacy because she was too old, and they could not refer her to the surgery next door. She couldn't figure out what to do and was overwhelmed by the system. The knock-on effect is that they don't use it and so are more ill at the point of accessing the healthcare. During Covid the banks offered a phone line for the over 75s because people can't deal with online services.”

Some feedback from the public shows a misconception that moving to an online system means that GPs can no longer be contacted by phone. On one GP website it says:

“Don't worry, please phone us and one of our friendly receptionists will be happy to help fill in the form on your behalf!”

This is a helpful message, but only reaches those who are already accessing the internet. On the phone message at the same practice one of the first messages to be heard is:

“If you would like an appointment please fill in the online triage consultation form on our website.”

This leads to confusion and anxiety among patients. When faced with moving to an online system, if patients don't feel included or understand the change, it results in negative feedback.

“Our surgery now wants us to complete an online form. It will make it even more difficult to see a GP. I think it is a step back. They should get the opinion of patients first - it feels like a unilateral decision. It has been done without any reference to patients.”

“Our surgery is changing to an online system. It says in the phone message we must book appointments online. If people aren't online they will have to get their relative to do it. Not everyone has a relative who can do this. They don't care about us anymore. It makes it incredibly difficult for older people who are not online. It is a big worry. They should be putting their most vulnerable patients first.”

“Our surgery is moving to an online triage system. You have to use a computer or laptop or mobile - it is going to be a right pain in the butt. I don't use computers and we share a mobile, but we need one each to use the NHS app.”

“GP practice have changed the way you can make an appointment. I didn't know so found the new process difficult. The receptionist was nice enough to fill out the online form for me, but I will need to think in the future how to do it.”

Summary and Next Steps

- Many patients value online triage systems, particularly those who are unable to make phone appointments. For many people online triage is seen as convenient and effective way to access primary care.
- Some patients perceive online triage systems as a barrier to making a doctor's appointment. There is a misconception that it has replaced the ability to phone up to make an appointment, causing anxiety. Clear communication from GP surgeries directed at those who are not online may address this concern.
- This feedback highlights groups of people who are unable to use an online system, for example older people, those with learning difficulties or literacy issues. Other groups, such as the homeless or visually impaired may have similar difficulties. Alternatives to the online system should be clearly signposted with carefully phrased instructions. Individuals should not be made to feel like they are causing a problem or receiving a second-rate service due to their circumstances, as this may lead them to reject contact with primary healthcare. These same individuals are unlikely to respond to other digital services or online engagement methods. To understand how best to meet their needs a face-to-face approach may be needed.
- A GP online triage system is only as effective as its programming and how this is interpreted by the human staff. Patients are likely to be dissatisfied if they are unable to access what they need, or if they don't receive a call back or timely care. This may contribute to a distrust or rejection of the system as a whole.

Failure to address these barriers risks widening health inequalities. Further consideration is needed to ensure that any move towards digital services enhances rather than restricts healthcare access for Warwickshire residents.

Healthwatch Warwickshire are an independent service for everyone who uses health and social care in Warwickshire. We help people understand the health and social care system through signposting. Together with our volunteers we make your voice heard to help improve NHS and Adult Social Care services, so the care you receive meets your needs.

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