healthwatch
Sandwell

Experiences of People Accessing GP (Primary Care) using Digital Applications in Sandwell

Contents

Introduction

Healthwatch Sandwell (HWS) is the independent voice of the public in health and social care in Sandwell. Healthwatch Sandwell collect feedback from the public in Sandwell about their experiences of using health and social care services and use that feedback to work with service providers and commissioners to find ways to improve services. One of the ways that we collect feedback is to carry out projects that reflect the priorities of the public and that focus on particular services, conditions or parts of the community.

One of HWS priorities for 2023/24 is to focus on engaging with under representative groups in Sandwell. Through our engagement work, we found that a big topic for discussion were the issues with accessing GP services. The use of digital applications (apps) was raised as an area concern for conversation.

We have carried out a project that looks at the experiences of people accessing and using digital applications (apps) for GP services, and the barriers to using them. This report will focus primarily on the NHS app, also referenced is the Air mid app.

In March 2021 Healthwatch Sandwell published a report Using Digital Technology in Primary Care Services. This report will revisit some of the key findings and review recommendations: https://www.healthwatchsandwell.co.uk/report/2024-03-26/diabetes-sandwell-march-2024

There have been large improvements in digital access since we published the report in 2021. However, some of the main issues with digital access still remain:

- Access to digital technology found to be a co-related issue for those with language barriers. Within the Minority Ethnicities group overall "**digital poverty**" was a factor
- The online registration process needs to be made easier for some people
- Consider a step-to-step guide "how to" guide with trouble shooting section and staff support offers
- A person-centred approach to help to establish which service options work best for individuals with support needs and to record preferences and support needs on individual records
- Review accessible communication formats offered and translation services

Note: The Black Country Integrated Care Board (ICB) Digital Team have established an Improving Access Digital Group for sensory loss. The partnership group are working on ways in which access can be improved for patients with sensory loss.

National Context

National research from Ofcom suggests that **1** in **14** households in the UK do not have access to the internet, an increase from **1** in **20** in 2023. Based on these statistics over **9,000** Sandwell households are potentially digitally excluded. However given the high levels of deprivation in Sandwell, the true figure is likely to be much higher, as people in the poorest households are at least **4** times more likely to be digitally excluded (Ofcom adults media use, 2020)[1].

- **20%** of residents say they have challenges to digital connectivity.
- **40%** of residents highlight lack of confidence around low complex digital tasks.

A lack of digital skills and access can have a huge negative impact on a person's life, leading to poorer health outcomes and lower life expectancy, increased loneliness and social isolation, less access to jobs and education. It can mean paying more for essentials, financial exclusion, and an increased risk of experiencing poverty. **23%** of children from the poorest households don't have access to broadband and a laptop, desktop or tablet (Ofcom, 2019[2]).

Currently some of our most vulnerable groups and individuals struggle to use the internet or lack the basic digital skills required to get online. More and more services have moved online and communities who are able can access help and support and yet for those in most need, this platform often remains inaccessible. A recent survey completed by the Good Things Foundation (Jan 2024)[3] found that **64%** of people nationwide believe there is not enough support for people who can't get online.

[1] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/adults/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-2021/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2020-21-chart-pack.pdf?v=326335

[2] https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/children/childrens-media-literacy-2019/children-media-use-attitudes-2019-report.pdf?v=324598

[3] https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/policy-and-research/research-and-evidence/research-2024/digital-nation.html

A Black Country Perspective

The table below show the proportion of patients that are registered with the NHS app in Sandwell in comparison to other areas in our region. Black Country overall to a target reach of **60%** Sandwell have relatively similar figures to that of Walsall Borough with a target reach of **7%** of the relative population.

Place	Feb - 24	Jan - 25	Difference (Feb to Dec)	To Reach Target	No Patient reg since Feb 24
BC ICB / system	48%	54%	6%	6%	67650
Dudley	55%	60%	5%	0%	15228
Sandwell	47%	53%	6%	7%	19515
Walsall	46%	52%	6%	8%	15967
Wolverhampton	45%	49%	4%	11%	16940

In 2023, the Sandwell Council for Voluntary Organisations residents survey highlighted that digital exclusion remains high in the Borough[4].

Nationally, Sandwell are at **62%** (**34,293,742**) of over **13** year olds registered for the NHS App.

Online Consultations

The table below shows GP practices with online consultations[5] enabled during core working hours. Some don't have online consultations during core working hours due to the set up)

---

[4] Understanding-the-Digital-Inequality-Challenge-in-Sandwell.pdf

[5] Accurx is an online platform that enable patients and healthcare professionals to communicate. This data is from The ICB Digital Data Primary Care Team.

Place	No practices with online consultations enabled during core working hours
BC ICB / system	111 /171
Dudley	33 /43
Sandwell	33 /47
Walsall	29/ 50
Wolverhampton	16/ 31

This table shows the number of GP practices that have online consultations available during working hours. In Sandwell 33 out of 47 have made this available as of February 2025.

Online forms for patients can be completed via NHS App (if practice using Accurx or a compliant solution) or via the GP website.

"We are continuing to work with GP practices to ensure they enable OC during core working hours, to meet their contractual obligations."

Statement from Black Country Primary Care Integrated Care Board

Methodology

The information for the project was gathered through **121** conversations and **5** focus groups. The aim was to capture a wide range of public voices and experiences and to gather deeper insight and conversations, on the barriers, issues and challenges presenting for some people.

To ensure that we have gathered the perspectives and views from a diverse and varied patient network, we held a number of focus groups within hospital and primary care settings. We also received feedback from staff.

- Portway Family Practice – Oldbury
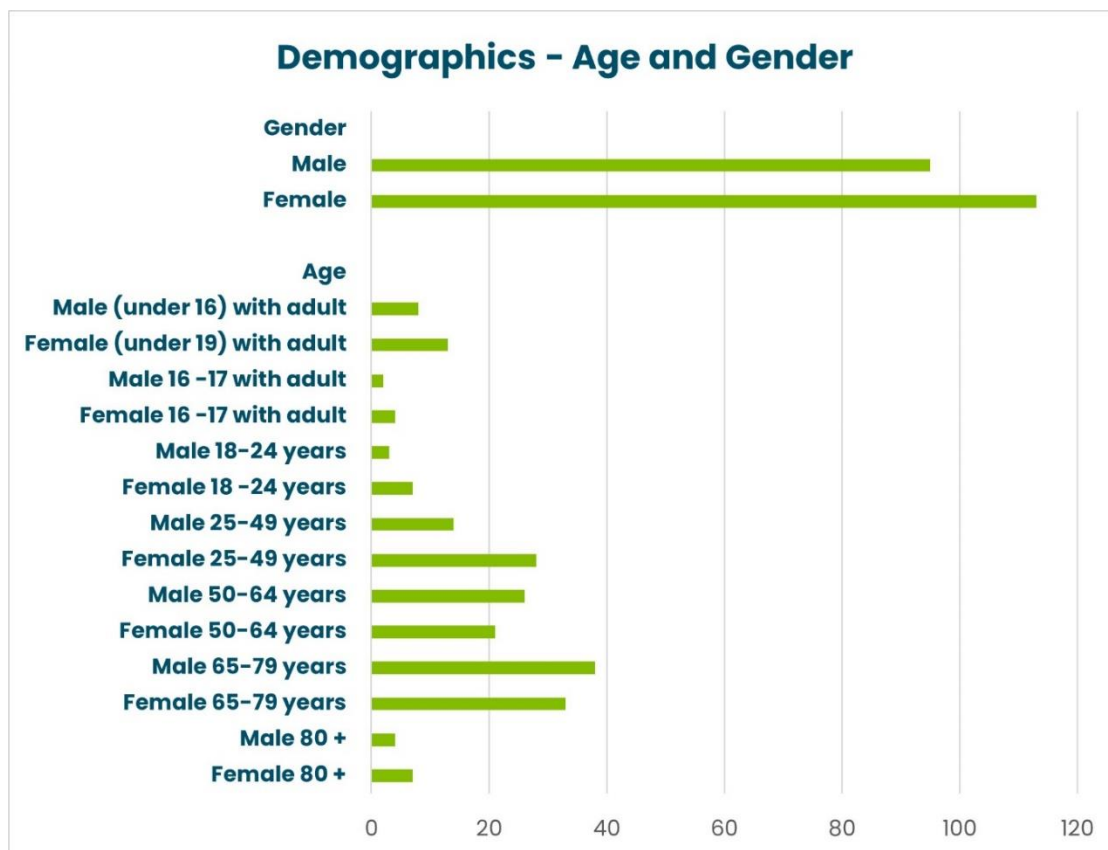- Oldbury Medical Centre – Oldbury

- Spires Medical Practice – Wednesbury
- The Lyng Medical Centre – West Bromwich
- Rood End Medical Practice – Smethwick
- SWBHT Sandwell Hospital – West Bromwich

HWS established **5** focus groups in different areas of Sandwell to look at the specific barriers, issues, and challenges to accessing and using digital apps that some people might face when using GP services. The key challenge areas were identified as around abilities, skill levels, support needs and resources – all of which could present risks of digital exclusion from access and use of services. These were held at:
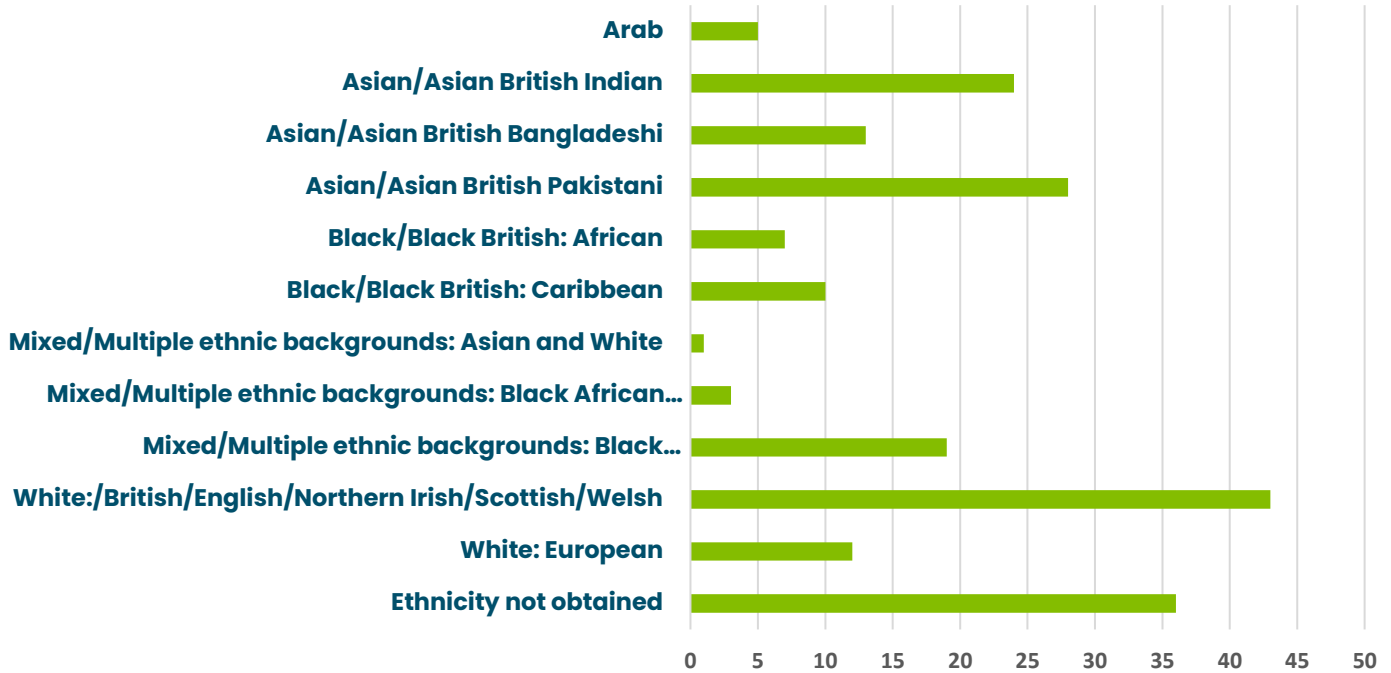
- Sandwell Aquatics Centre - Smethwick
- Portway Lifestyle Centre - Oldbury
- Let's Chat drop in café – West Bromwich
- Guru Nanak Gurdwara - Smethwick
- Muslim Community Centre – Tipton

Who took part

Through the Engagement events we engaged with **208** patients / members of the public. This included capturing comments from people about using digital applications but also having general conversations about their experiences.

Demographics - Age and Gender

Demographics - Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Value
Arab	5
Asian/Asian British Indian	24
Asian/Asian British Bangladeshi	13
Asian/Asian British Pakistani	28
Black/Black British: African	7
Black/Black British: Caribbean	10
Mixed/Multiple ethnic backgrounds: Asian and White	1
Mixed/Multiple ethnic backgrounds: Black African…	3
Mixed/Multiple ethnic backgrounds: Black…	19
White:/British/English/Northern Irish/Scottish/Welsh	43
White: European	12
Ethnicity not obtained	36

Findings

Findings One

People told us that there were varying degrees of accessibility in downloading the NHS app. Some patients could automatically download the app, however a proportion of people needed to get access codes from their GP and were told that they had to visit the GP surgery to access these.

Patient's feedback

"*Registration* is not that easy, and you need id to get passcodes. GP online is straight forward. Tried to book appointment online but unavailable" – Wednesbury

"I use the NHS app but having great difficulty linking this to my daughter for her medical records too much red tape" – Tipton

"I won't use the app as I tried to download its and it was asking for ID and passcodes. I gave up in the end" – West Bromwich

> "My family don't use the apps from either the GP or NHS as we don't know how to use them, we tried but it's hard" – Oldbury

> "I have been told to use the Evergreen App but it keeps asking for passcodes. No one has told me about the linkage keys" – Rowley Regis

Personal story

L has a daughter aged 17 who has multiple long term health conditions. L has been trying to get her daughter an appointment with the GP for over a week but was unable to get through on the telephone. L then decided to download the NHS app to see if an appointment could be sourced through digital means. NHS app requested 3 codes to access her records. L had to go into the surgery to request the codes but was informed by reception staff that they did not give out passcodes and that it was not part of their practice function, so L would have to call in to book an appointment!

Findings two

Many members of the public are not aware of all the features in the NHS app. This includes the function of '**contact your GP'**. This is a contact form where you can put in details of issues, photos and request advice. This is then clinically assessed, and the patient is informed through the app or a text message, of any action required and when.

Patient feedback

> "I use the NHS app but didn't know that you can request advice on the app under contact your GP for advice, until now" – Wednesbury

We have been informed that some GP surgeries have disabled this function, we are unclear on the reason why and the length of time the function is not available.
To obtain clarity we have spoken to the Primary Care Digital Lead for the Black Country Integrated Care Board who have informed us that this feature is turned off by some GP practices during none working hours.

Findings three

"**Digital poverty**" is a term becoming more widely used. For the purposes of this report, it is used as a term to encapsulate lack of digital equipment or internet access due to individual or household financial resources. HWS also found skill levels on using digital technology was a factor people, this is another risk factor of digital exclusion.

People told us they don't or cannot access digital apps as their mobile phone is not compatible due to its age. Some people said that their mobile phone is too small to see the details in the app and some said that they did not have a phone at all. This creates challenges around digital inequalities.

Some people also informed us that they think that the app will be too difficult to use so don't attempt to download it.

Findings four

There were some positive experiences that people shared, ordering repeat prescriptions, booking blood tests was easy and to look at test results and GP letters was quite straight forward; therefore, people didn't have to call the GP for results.

Patient's feedback

"I use the AirMid app and its great. You can access records and book blood tests and get the results. Work really well" – Oldbury

"I book blood tests online through AirMid, really easy to use, have used the NHS app for over 2 years and can get appointments" – Oldbury

"I use the NHS app to check letters and repeat prescriptions, I have been using it for 2 years and it's very useful! – Black Heath

Personal story

Mr T is a patient at a Health Centre in Wednesbury. Mr T has been having issues with diabetes for some time and has been unable to manage and control his condition. Mr T uses a wheelchair most of the time and has swollen legs and severe leg and ankle ulcers.

Mr T has been using the AirMid app for some time for blood test, repeat prescriptions and to check appointments with the community nurse. He told us that the care that he receives is very good at the surgery and at home but is limited in what he can check and do with the AirMid app.

The Digital First Primary Care Team undertook an engagement event at the end of last year at the Health Centre to promote the NHS app and sign patients up. The team discussed with Mr T the benefits of the NHS app and the additional functions. Mr T didn't know that he could check medical records, letters and contact the GP to seek advice. He has now signed up to the NHS app and finds it both easier to use and more beneficial.

Engagement with health care providers and voluntary sector organisations

As part of our engagement, we have also been having conversations with healthcare providers and members from community and voluntary sector organisations.
Some of the comments we received.

> **Healthcare providers and members from the community and voluntary sector organisations feedback**
>
> "A large proportion of our community have digital literacy challenges, whilst we also have a culture from some people that they need or prefer to call the GP practice as it is more reassuring. Whilst digital app is good for many, we must ensure that there are other options and choice for patients"
>
> "We have high levels of people within our communities who cannot read or write in English and that apps are just technical to use"
>
> "How do we support those who are not registered with a GP or are transitional between areas and communities. Do GP's still offer a small
>
> number of appointments for people who are not registered with a practice?"
>
> "The NHS app is great but when is it going to be linked to the wider system? There were conversations about a patient shared care record. How does this all fit in?"

Conclusion

Whilst there is encouragement for people across Sandwell to use the functions of the NHS app, there are still clear inconsistencies within GP practices as to what they offer. Some of the main issues are:

- NHS apps allow people to book appointments but there are no, or few appointments are available.

- Some people are not fully aware of all the functionalities of the NHS app.

- Some people are using other apps

- Some people have experienced technical issues with the NHS app.

By working with the ICS Digital Engagement Team, we acknowledge that positive efforts are being made within communities and at GP surgeries to promote the NHS app and also guide people in how to use it.

However, through engagement we have found that there are many inconsistencies through GP practices with how and what patients currently use and access.
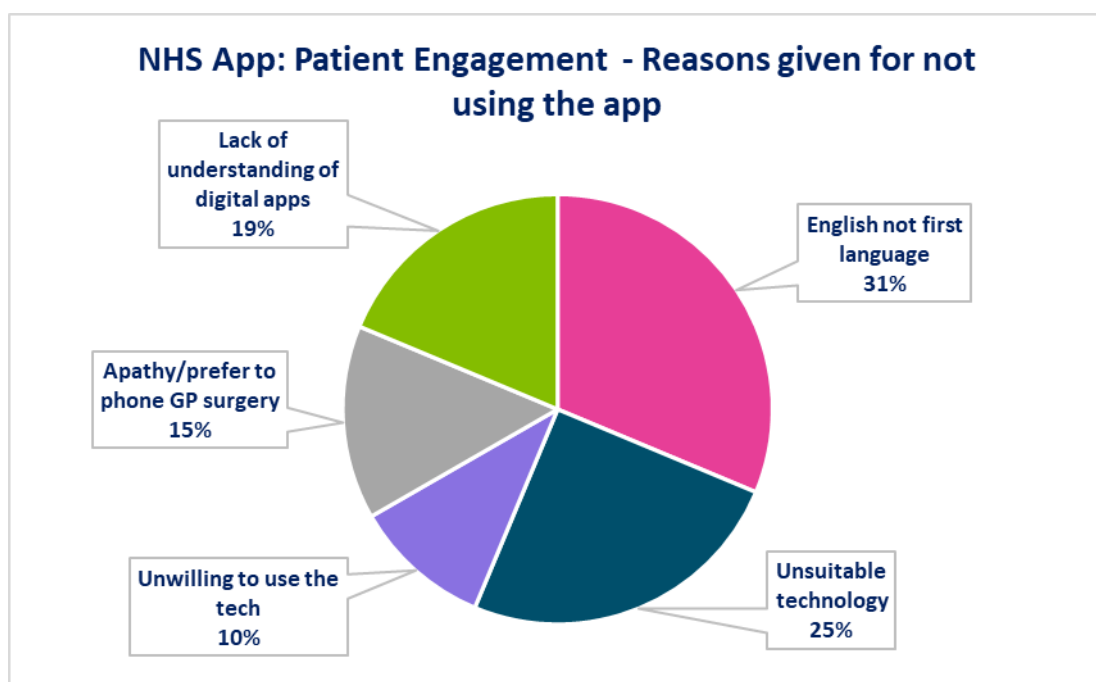
There are a wide range of systems being used including:

- System Online

- System One

- NHS app
- Air Mid app
- Patient Access
- System Connect

The key challenge areas were identified as around abilities, skill levels, support needs and resources – all of which could present risks of digital exclusion from access and use of services.

This graph below highlights the reasons for non uptake in digital applications as a percentage.

NHS App: Patient Engagement - Reasons given for not using the app

- Lack of understanding of digital apps — 19%
- English not first language — 31%
- Apathy/prefer to phone GP surgery — 15%
- Unsuitable technology — 25%
- Unwilling to use the tech — 10%

Next steps

- More support in the community to enable people to download the NHS app and understand its function. Especially where there are health inequalities
- A person-centred approach to help to establish which service options work best for individuals with support needs and to record preferences and support needs on individual records.
- **People should be informed when additional functions of the NHS app are disabled. If patients can only use the seek advice from your GP function in working hours this needs to be made clear.**
- People to be made aware that contact your GP is a triage system and not a booking appointments feature.
- GP practices must ensure that there are a variety of ways in which patients can book appointments.
- The online registration process needs to be made easier. Consider a step-to-step guide "how to" guide with trouble shooting section and staff support offers.

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Sandwell would like to thank all the participants who gave us their experiences of digital applications. We would also like to thank the organisations and GP practices that hosted us for undertaking this project.

healthwatch
Sandwell