Accessibility is no longer a nice to have, it's a legal requirement

Today, there is variation in the digital experiences patients receive from practice websites across the UK. Results from last year's NHS patient survey found that 75.4% of patients found their GP practice website easy to use, a decrease of 0.8 percentage points compared with 2020 (76.2%).[1] That's over 20% of patients who experienced difficulties when accessing GP services digitally.

While a recent review from Healthwatch into the accessibility of 80 GP practice websites found that the "overwhelming majority did not meet the requirements set out in the NHS Accessible Information Standard."[2]

That standard makes accessibility a legal requirement.[3] With around one in five people in the UK today living with a disability, ensuring practice websites are easy to use and meet the needs of all patients goes hand-in-hand with making sure no one is left behind.[4]

Furthermore, the NHS Long Term Plan sets out aims to offer every patient digital-first primary care by 2023/24 as a right.[5] A fundamental part of that aim will be the GP practice website. As an alternative to phoning a practice, the ability for patients to submit a request for help via a practice website's online form or find advice about a medical issue will no longer just be about convenience, it will be a necessity.

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Patients are increasingly turning to their practice website
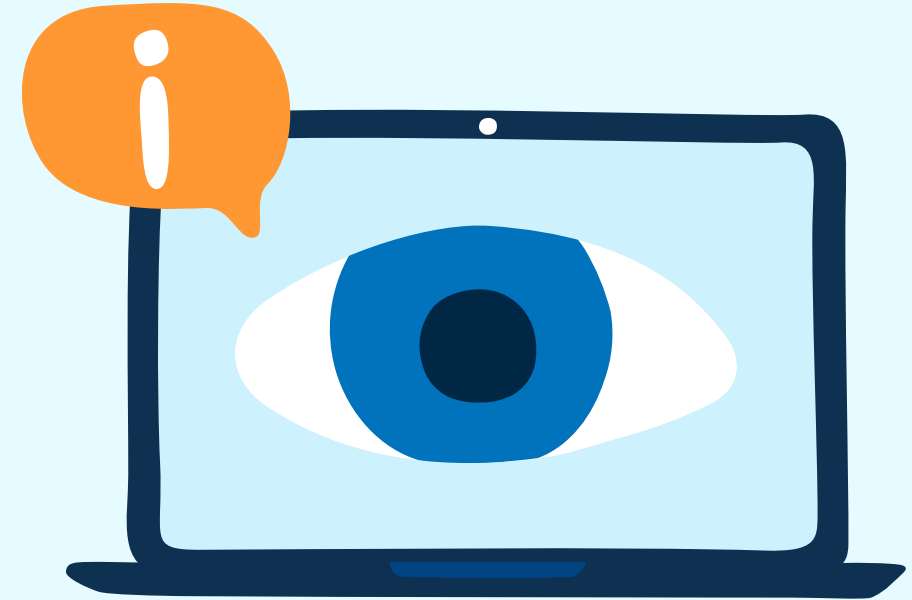
In 2021, more than half of patients (52.7%) tried to use their GP practice website to access information or services, an increase of 10.6 percentage points compared with 2020 (42.0%).[1]

The nation's rapid reliance on and shift into digital healthcare post-pandemic has significantly increased the need for better, more streamlined digital services in primary care, but many practices are still trying to catch up.

In the aforementioned Healthwatch survey of websites, only 1 had an EasyRead version of content available on online, with others requiring patients to submit a request and wait anywhere from 5 to 28 working days for a reply.[6]

Certainly from our experience, when looking at some GP practice websites, we can, unfortunately, see lots of potential issues. Content is often written for offline consumption and poorly translated when viewed online, and accessibility issues make online transactions difficult if NHS Digital Service Manual standards are not met.

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Patients need up-to-date information, clearer signposting and greater choice

For patients, finding accurate, medically validated health information is essential. Online misinformation can often be more damaging than helpful. It's one of the reasons we offer plug-and-play NHS content in our websites that provides patients with information they can trust, while removing the administrative burden of content upkeep for practices.

Good, accessible web design can also help signpost patients to the services they need when they need them. And the ability to book appointments and make other transactions online such as prescriptions can ease strain on practices.

However, Healthwatch data indicates that booking an appointment online was found to be difficult in over a quarter of practice websites due to site complexity and poor navigation. Indeed, the majority were found to not include an option to book appointments online.[6]

As stated in the report: "This could ultimately detract from patient experience. The offer of a virtual appointment provides patients with a greater degree of flexibility and ensures that services are as accessible as possible."

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Digital inclusion can be an enabler for better outcomes

Finally, evidence suggests greater digital inclusion can support patient and system outcomes. Results from the NHS Widening Digital Participation Programme, show the potential positive impact of supporting vulnerable patient groups to build digital health skills.[7]

The programme's evaluation also estimates £3.7m in saved GP visits, £2.3m saved in A&E visits and savings of £6 million in just 12 months.

Of individuals who learnt to use digital platforms through the programme:

59% felt more confident in using online health information

52% felt less lonely or isolated

54% would go to the internet first for non-urgent medical advice

51% have used the internet to look for ways to improve mental health and wellbeing

Impacts at a system level show:

21% made fewer calls or visits to their GP

10% made fewer calls to NHS 111

6% made fewer visits to A&E

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Need support?

Ensuring your website features inclusive design can be complicated. But following NHS Digital Design and Inclusion Principles is a solid start to building an accessible digital experience for patients. These principles are:

Go to where people are
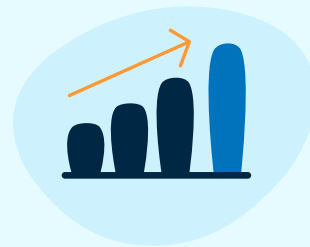
Work with the people who know them best

Co-design: from initial discovery phase to live service and beyond

Build solutions that fit into people's everyday lives

Use existing tools and resources wherever possible

Outcomes first, then digital

Watch your language

Full guidance is of course available within the NHS Digital Service Manual.

However, if you're still unsure where to begin, Livi offers a free consultation service. The process is simple and involves a short questionnaire to help you tell us all we need to know about your current site. After that, in just 2-3 weeks we can get your new website up and running with an nhs.uk domain name.

We build websites in accordance with NHS guidelines and accessibility laws. This delivers a website that's not only fully compliant, but also easier for patients to use and easier for your team to maintain. In addition, our websites are designed to drive online engagement and help you manage patient demand.

Whether you're a primary care provider, ICS or offer wider clinical services, our platform provides a complete website solution.

To find out more information visit: mjog.livi.co.uk

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References

1 NHS England. GP Patient Survey 2021.
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4 NHS. Digital Service Manual.
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