Digital self care audit

November 2020

PAGB Digital self care audit

i Introduction

A national self care information hub

A review and roll out of self care apps

Digital triage routes to self care

Call to action

i Introduction

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, public health messages have encouraged people to self care for self-treatable conditions to both minimise the spread of COVID-19 and reduce avoidable pressures on NHS services.

During this time, we have also seen an acceleration in the advancement of digital and remote healthcare services to provide support and care for people without requiring face-to-face interactions. As a result, we have seen a shift in attitudes towards both self care and digital healthcare services – as well as a proof of concept that when self care messages are readily accessible and trusted, widespread behavioural change is possible. It is important now that this is maintained and embedded for the long term.

This document makes recommendations for how recent advancements across digital platforms and remote services during the pandemic can be harnessed to lock-in a longer-term shift towards self care. It has been informed by an audit of online platforms where people commonly access information about managing their health in England to analyse what information is available and how accessible it is. It builds on PAGB's 2019 *Self care and technology report* 📖 and sets out three steps to improve self care through digital resources:

1. The establishment of a national self care information hub

2. A review of existing and new self care apps to encourage consistent roll out across the country

3. Improvements in digital triaging routes, so that people are referred to self care, where it is the appropriate solution

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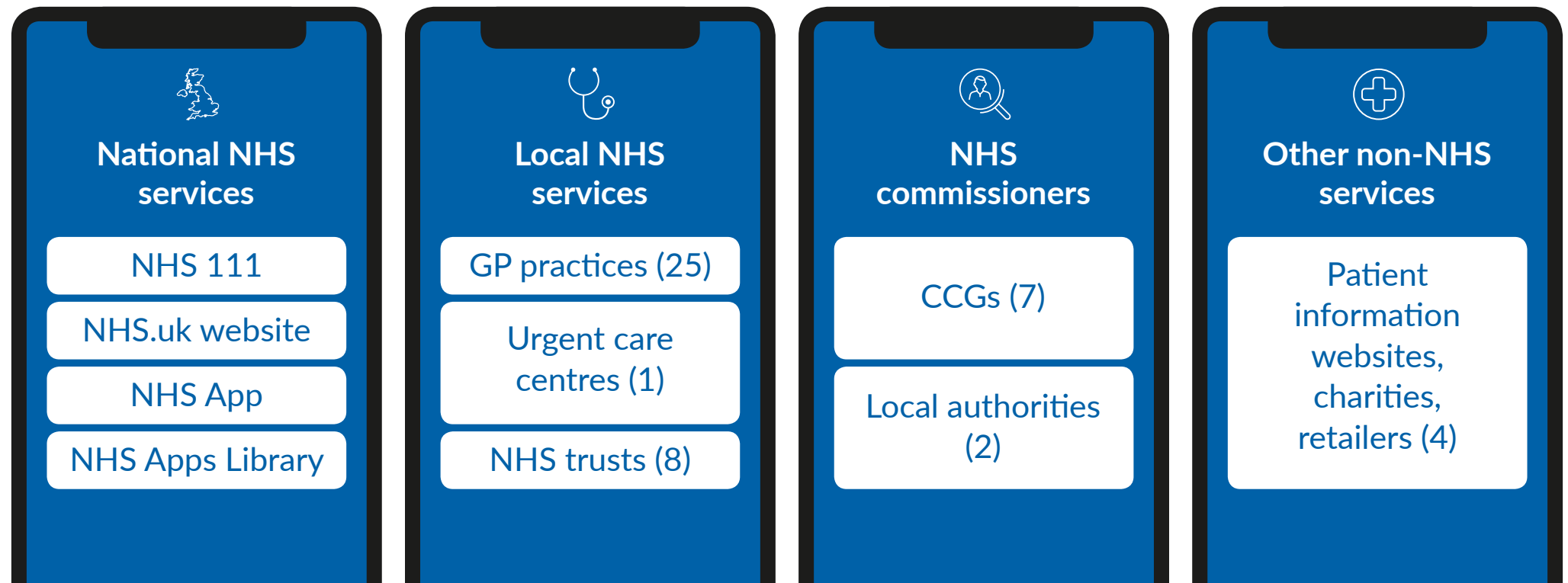
Digital triage routes to self care

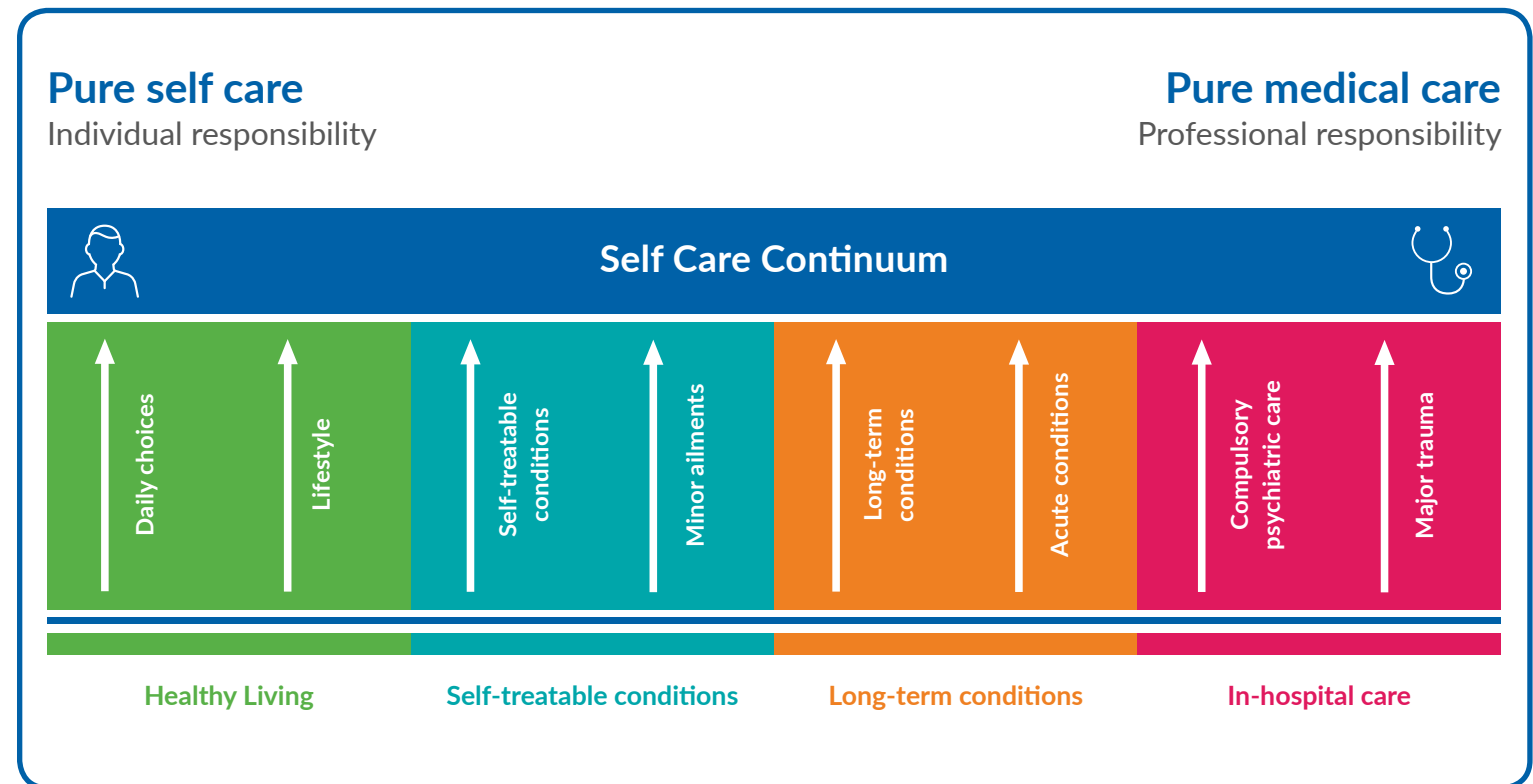Call to action

i Methodology

PAGB undertook an audit of online platforms where people commonly access information about their health, between March and May 2020.

The sources examined were from across the following categories:

National NHS services	**Local NHS services**	**NHS commissioners**	**Other non-NHS services**
NHS 111	GP practices (25)	CCGs (7)	Patient information websites, charities, retailers (4)
NHS.uk website	Urgent care centres (1)	Local authorities (2)	
NHS App	NHS trusts (8)		
NHS Apps Library			

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i About self care

Self care comprises the actions that individuals take for themselves, on behalf of and with others, to develop, protect, maintain and improve their health, wellbeing and wellness. This audit focused on information related to the self-treatable conditions section of the Self Care Continuum.

Pure self care
Individual responsibility

Pure medical care
Professional responsibility

Self Care Continuum

Daily choices	Lifestyle	Self-treatable conditions	Minor ailments	Long-term conditions	Acute conditions	Compulsory psychiatric care	Major trauma

Healthy Living **Self-treatable conditions** **Long-term conditions** **In-hospital care**

Based on Self Care Forum infographic

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i PAGB's recommendations

It is vital that advancements across digital platforms and remote services during the pandemic are harnessed to ensure a longer-term shift towards self care.
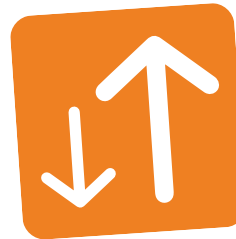
This briefing sets out three steps to improve self care through digital resources:

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i Digital transformation beyond the pandemic

During the pandemic, the public were told to stay at home and avoid using the NHS if possible or seek remote or digital care options instead. For those experiencing minor ailments, self-treatable conditions, or indeed mild COVID-19 symptoms, this message was one of self care. It's important to be clear that self care is not 'no care'.

In the aftermath of the first COVID-19 peak, PAGB undertook a *public survey* 📖 to understand whether this experience had shifted people's attitudes towards self care. The results reveal the pandemic has shifted people's attitudes to self care:

24% of respondents said COVID-19 had changed their attitude to self care

69% of respondents who would not have considered self care as their first option before the pandemic said they were more likely to do so in the future

31% of respondents who would not normally consult a pharmacist as their first option said they would be more likely to do so in the future

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Results from *PAGB's survey* also revealed that the pandemic has shifted people's attitudes to how they access information online.

A majority of respondents indicated they had used the internet to find out information around coronavirus symptoms and over three quarters of respondents felt the NHS should make more self care information available online. Many respondents who hadn't previously looked up their symptoms online said they are now more likely to do so.

63% of respondents said they had used the internet to find out information about the symptoms of COVID-19

77% of respondents agree the NHS should make more information available online about self care

44% who didn't previously look up their symptoms online as a first step say they are now more likely to do so
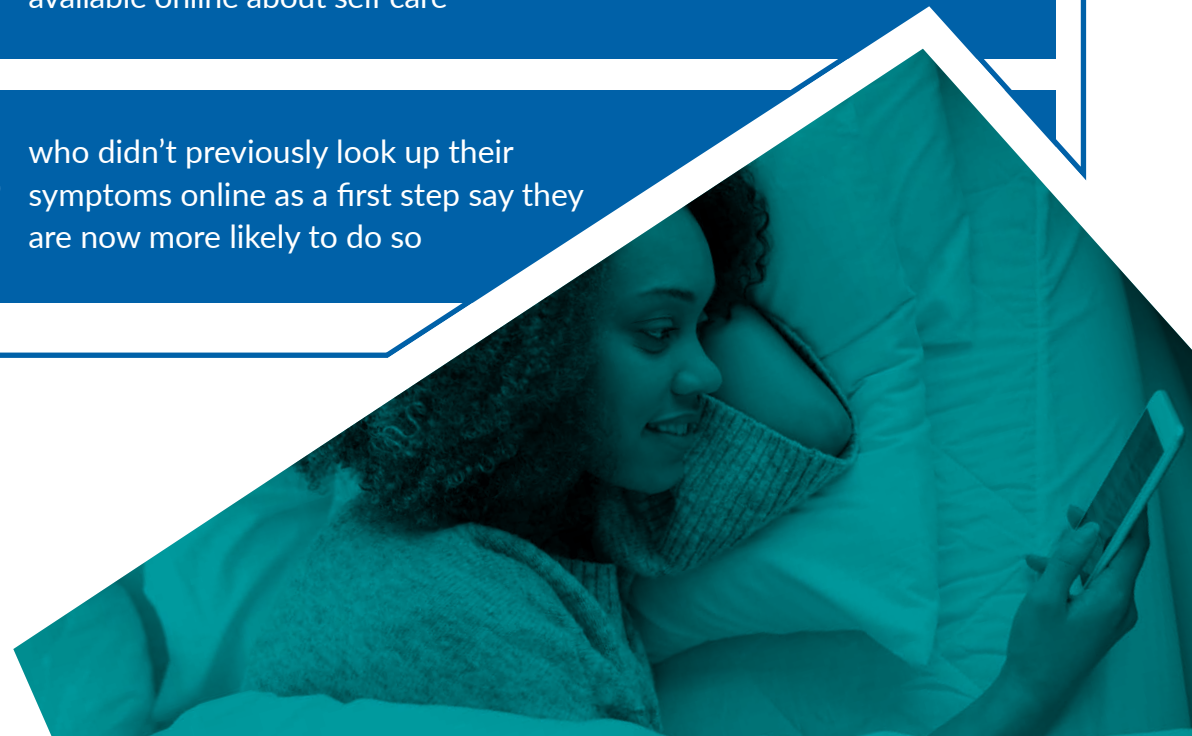
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Other organisations are also recognising the role of self care – including digital self care – in helping individuals to maintain and improve their health, wellbeing and wellness.

The *Royal College of General Practitioners* published a report on *General practice in the post COVID world* 📖 highlighting how patients have had to self care during the pandemic and that, moving forward, it is vital that general practice develops the capabilities to encourage and support patients to self care. The report recommends NHS workforce bodies develop the coaching and motivational interviewing capabilities required to better support patients to self care.

The *Royal Pharmaceutical Society* acknowledges the importance of *digital advancements and informatics* 📖 in enhancing the services they provide, including the importance of interoperability between informatics systems to ensure consistent care for people between their interaction with pharmacies and the wider NHS.

The IPPR, the *Institute for Public Policy Research*, published a recent report *Prevention in the age of information* 📖 that revealed 67% of adults want to see partnerships forged between the NHS and large tech companies continue beyond the pandemic. Amongst its recommendations, the think tank called for the NHS App to be developed to include new features designed to encourage behaviour change to support improved prevention of ill health, as well as improved capacity for schools to deliver better health education.

📢 PAGB has been working with the clinical community to build consensus on the importance of self care and how it can be supported through tangible policy recommendations.

The latest clinical consensus statement can be found *here* 📖 and the report of our original roundtable held in October 2019 *here.* 📖

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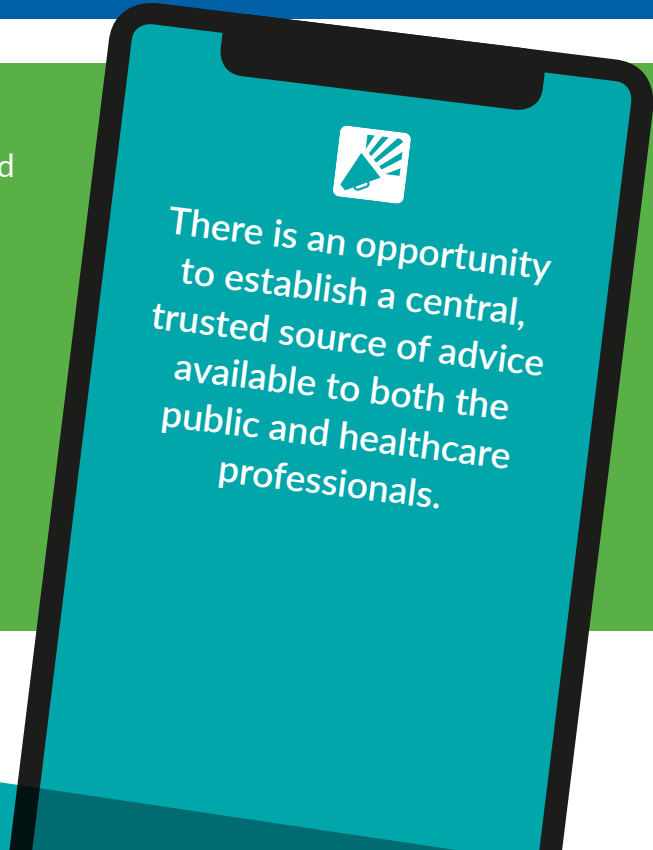
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A national self care information hub

There is no central hub for self care information on national NHS websites or apps.

37 of the websites reviewed directed users to national NHS websites for additional information on self care. While self care advice is available on the NHS.uk website and the NHS App, users must navigate an alphabetised list of conditions and treatments to locate relevant information on self care.

There is an opportunity to establish a central, trusted source of advice available to both the public and healthcare professionals.

A dedicated self care page on the NHS.uk website and the NHS App...

...would ensure that advice on self care is more accessible and comprehensive. Users could be directed to this hub via their local healthcare service website, the symptom checker currently available on the NHS 111 online service and the NHS App.

NHS Health at home

How to access NHS services online

The NHS.uk's *Health at home* 📖 page provides information on accessing online primary care services, including ordering repeat prescriptions, contacting GPs, and managing long-term conditions. This approach should be replicated for self care.

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Case study: accuRx

Recommendation 1

NHS England should develop a self care section in the NHS App and on the NHS website. It should include fact sheets, such as those from the Self Care Forum, and easy to understand advice on the likely duration of symptoms, what 'normal' symptoms to expect, red-flag symptoms for which medical attention should be sought, and treatment options and how to access them.

What is it?

accuRx is a healthcare software company. Their Chain SMS is used by GP practices to communicate with patients, allowing them to send advice, results and appointment reminders straight to their phones. It can generate links directly to the NHS.uk website. The service is compatible with the main NHS electronic patient record systems and is used in over 90% of all GP practices. The service is also used in pharmacies and provides patient education, including information leaflets and self care guidance.

Why is it important?

Platforms, apps and other services like Chain SMS are increasing used by clinicians to communicate more efficiently with their patients. There is an opportunity for such services to direct patients to a dedicated space on NHS.uk where they can receive consistent and clear self care advice. This would improve people's understanding of self care, as well as increase the opportunities for healthcare professionals to educate patients without adding any additional burden.

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A review and roll out of self care apps

The NHS Apps Library algorithm for self care only covers self care for long-term conditions, not self-treatable conditions or minor ailments.

There is therefore an opportunity to enhance the accessibility of accredited apps that provide self care advice, symptom checkers and digital triage.

When searching for *"self care"*

in the NHS Apps Library, six apps are returned, all of which are to support the management of long-term conditions such as asthma, COPD and diabetes.

However, from our audit we know that there are more apps out there that do support self care for self-treatable conditions and broader health and wellbeing. Moreover, some GP websites use apps to provide self care advice, such as Health Help Now which is utilised in West Essex.

The NHS Apps Library should be providing both providers and the public with trusted sources of self care advice and support. There are an increasing number of credible self care apps which could be better signposted and utilised.

An NHS review of these apps, alongside an update to the NHS Apps Library search algorithm, would help signpost more people towards these trusted sources and ensure consistency in the quality of advice available to the public on self care.

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Case study: Health Help Now

What is it?

Health Help Now is an app providing self care advice and guidance within local areas, signposting users to the relevant local health and care services. The app uses a symptom checker, lists common symptoms across a range of conditions and offers self care advice for suggested treatments. The app currently has versions used in Kent, Brent and West Essex.

Why is it important?

By encouraging the use of platforms and apps which are tools for digital self care, like *Health Help Now*, we can ensure that robust, trusted self care advice is accessible, available to all and tailored to local areas. It helps to ensure people are signposted appropriately across NHS services and can attend the right setting, at the right time for their healthcare needs, thereby managing demand on local services.

Recommendation 2

NHSX should explore how self care apps could support greater self care, encourage the use of pharmacies and help manage demand on local GPs, including undertaking a review of existing self care apps and incorporating them accordingly into the NHS Apps Library.

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Digital triage routes to self care

There is a lack of consistency in triaging people towards pharmacies where this is the appropriate care pathway.

Out of the 25 GP practices reviewed,

12 referred or directed patients towards pharmacy care;

2 of those practices provided named local pharmacies on their website;

7 utilised NHS England's UK pharmacy finder tool either embedded on their website or linked to the NHS.uk site.

Some practices utilised their own services, such as *Footfall* which provides self care advice on several conditions and directs patients to local pharmacies. One hospital trust, together with the local CCG, utilised a third-party online A&E assessment app, *Ask A&E*, to triage patients to the appropriate service in their area including the community pharmacy.

This is a clear opportunity to ensure that people with self-treatable conditions are triaged towards self care rather than connecting them to a GP or A&E.

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There are numerous 'front doors' to the NHS, most of which include some form of in-person or online triaging to direct people towards the right care setting. The NHS 111 phone service has looked to improve its algorithms and increasingly direct people towards self care where it is appropriate.

This should be expanded to other digital triaging systems used by healthcare providers. Information from these systems could also be gathered about people's behaviours to inform greater understanding about how people navigate digital self care, and therefore how to drive improvements.
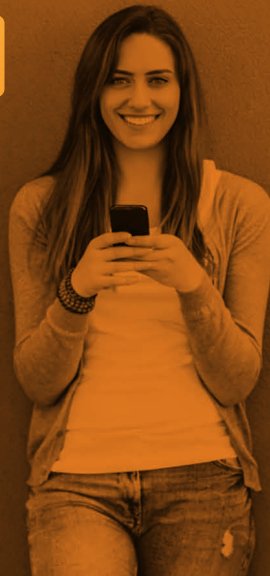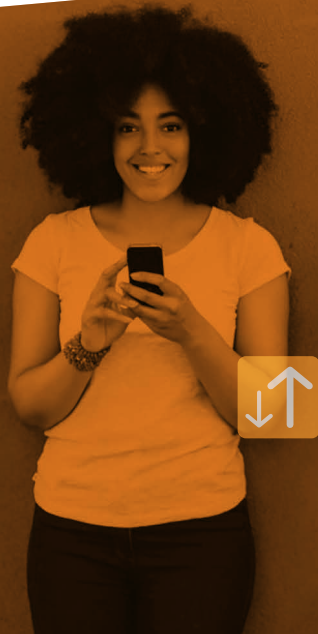
During the pandemic, digital health services provided clear and consistent messaging around the management of coronavirus symptoms, signposting users to the appropriate service.

Lessons can be learnt from this approach, applying it to further enable self care with clear and consistent messaging and signposting for self-treatable conditions.

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Case study: Ask A&E

Recommendation 3

NHSX should ensure online triage systems direct people based on their symptoms and signpost to local pharmacies for self-treatable conditions where appropriate, rather than connecting them to a GP

What is it?

Babylon's Ask A&E tool directs patients to the appropriate NHS service based on the symptoms they input. This includes booking a GP appointment, visiting a pharmacy, or staying at home and monitoring symptoms. After being rolled out by University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust in October 2019, less than 30% of queries required an A&E visit, while 55% resulted in advice being issued on self care or patients directed to a non-urgent service.

Why is it important?

NHS services are more stretched than ever before. Utilising digital symptom checkers and triaging systems to ensure patients are signposted to the appropriate service has never been more important, particularly in the face of a pandemic. It empowers people with self-treatable conditions to seek pharmacist advice and self care. Collecting data on patient use of such tools furthers our understanding of how people navigate digital self care.

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Now, more than ever, it is vital that online self care information and advice is clear and accessible, and digital tools are used to enhance this access. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the digitisation of healthcare services can happen at pace and scale when required.

There is a critical window to embed the innovation we have seen over the last few months, to further support people with self-treatable conditions to self care. We have a unique opportunity to promote and embed self care behaviour, helping to reduce the unnecessary demand of self-treatable conditions in primary and urgent care settings throughout the NHS.

PAGB is calling for a **National Self Care Strategy** that can take forward these recommendations to improve digital self care.

For further information, get in touch at *selfcare@pagb.co.uk*.

About PAGB

PAGB, the consumer healthcare association, is the trade association representing manufacturers of branded over-the-counter medicines, self care medical devices and food supplements.

www.pagb.co.uk

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PAGB The Consumer Healthcare Association