



HOUSE OF LORDS

COVID-19 Committee

House of Lords
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The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

Dear Matt,

Digital equipment and skills for health professionals

The COVID-19 Committee recently undertook a wide-ranging inquiry into how the pandemic has accelerated the use of, and reliance on, digital technology, and the implications this may have for our individual, and broader societal, wellbeing in the long term.

The increasing number of physical and mental health appointments being delivered digitally was, unsurprisingly, raised by a number of our witnesses. It was clear that this approach brought benefits to many people, but also disadvantaged or excluded many others, with significant concerns raised about the long-term implications for people's health if, post-pandemic, adequate care was not given to ensuring that decisions about whether to deliver services on or offline took account of people's digital access and preferences as well as the most effective therapeutic approach. We also heard about people's frustration in accessing online services. Some felt that this created an additional barrier to accessing GPs and other health professionals and wanted to see this barrier removed as soon as possible. We made a number of recommendations relating to these issues in our report and may write to you further on these points once we have received the Government's response.

Additionally, however, we heard during our inquiry that health professionals often lacked the skills and equipment to operate digitally. One survey by the BMA, for example, found that nearly half of doctors said internet speed/ bandwidth was a barrier to providing remote consultations. Witnesses told us about the outdated hardware and software that physical and mental health professionals are working with and the lack of training provided on both using the technology and on how to effectively communicate and assess patients remotely. This is not a problem that will go away once COVID-related social distancing restrictions are lifted and appointments can return to 'face-to-face'. The pandemic has raised both patients' and practitioners' awareness of the benefits that can come from an increased element of digital healthcare, and many will want and expect this to continue.

With that in mind, we would be grateful if you could respond and let us know how your department is monitoring the extent to which health professionals have both the equipment

and skills necessary to provide remote consultations. In particular, we would appreciate answers to the following questions.

- 1) What assessment have you made of the number of GPs without access to the necessary hardware and software?
- 2) What assessment have you made of the number of GPs without access to an adequate internet connection?
- 3) What assessment have you made of the number of GPs without the necessary skills to deliver remote consultations?
- 4) What plans do you have to ensure that all health professionals have adequate digital equipment and skills, to enable them to deliver healthcare services effectively in today's digital world?

We look forward to receiving your reply.

Baroness Martha Lane-Fox of Soho CBE
Chair of the COVID-19 Select Committee