



Department  
of Health &  
Social Care

*From the Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP  
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care*

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Baroness Martha Lane-Fox of Soho CBE  
Chair, House of Lords Covid-19 Select Committee

By email: [hlcovid19cmttee@parliament.uk](mailto:hlcovid19cmttee@parliament.uk)

08 July 2021

Dear Martha,

### **Digital equipment and skills for health professionals**

Thank you for your letter on behalf of the House of Lords Covid-19 Committee about the inquiry into how the pandemic has accelerated the use of and reliance on digital technology, and raising the additional findings that health professionals often lacked the skills and equipment to operate digitally.

General practice teams have done a huge amount to support their patients throughout the pandemic and I am grateful for their tireless efforts. Early in the pandemic, GP teams and Primary Care Networks (PCNs) rapidly changed, in extreme circumstances, how services are delivered. They now offer more remote consultations and total triage services, which, alongside face to face appointments, provide extra flexibility and convenience for patients to access the right service, with the right member of the primary care team, at the right time. Now 99% of practices can deliver video consultations, up from 3% pre-pandemic.

I understand some patients have concerns about accessing GP services, including getting through on the telephone and the availability of face to face appointments. We know that remote consultation, telemedicine and online access provide flexibility for patients accessing services and that many people find online consultations more convenient and accessible. Total triage has also been a valuable tool for practices in managing demand and played an important role in ensuring Covid-19 symptomatic patients don't come into practices - enabling practices to prioritise the most urgent cases and helping navigate patients to the right services or professional.

On 20 May 2021, NHS England and Improvement (NHSEI) published updated the Standard Operating Procedures for general practice in the context of Covid-19. This sets out several guidelines for practices. A blended approach of both face to face and remote appointments should be available to patients according to clinical appropriateness. Patient preferences for face to face and remote care need to be respected unless there are good clinical reasons to the contrary, for example the presence of Covid-19 symptoms. Practice receptions should be clearly open, so patients without access to phones or online services are not disadvantaged. Patients must be able to either go online or walk into practice reception areas for triage, as well as care. Finally, practices are to review

communications to ensure patients understand how to access GP services. The guidance and communications issued to General Practice can be found [here](#).

The Department is working closely with NHSEI and NHSX who continually monitor and assess with local commissioners the extent that general practice teams have the equipment and skills to provide remote consultations, providing support where appropriate. The Department, NHSEI and NHSX always maintain an open dialogue with GP representatives and professional bodies to understand issues facing their members and as we build back better from the pandemic, we will continue to work together to learn from what worked well to ensure high quality services for patients.

Specific answers to your questions raised in the letter are below:

1. *What assessment have you made of the number of GPs without access to the necessary hardware and software?*

There was National and Regional engagement with local systems at the outset of the pandemic to undertake a detailed assessment of additional requirements to support the increased need for remote working to inform the central procurement of hardware and software, for subsequent local deployment into general practice. Business as usual arrangements for the provision of GP IT systems and support services are set out in the GP IT Operating Model, meaning practices can expect a minimum level of support service and IT provision. In response to lessons learned from the pandemic the updated version of the GP IT Operating Model due for publication shortly, includes an updated core and mandated requirement for 60% of practice staff and clinicians to be able to work remotely.

As part of the Covid-19 response, 40,000 laptops and over 21,000 headsets provided for deployment to general practices, to support remote working.

The long-term plan set out a strategic direction for general practice to utilise online and video consultations as an alternative/addition to face to face appointments. As part of the Covid-19 response, practices were required to triage all patient contacts and were asked to put in place an online consultation system in place to support this.

NHSEI set up a new collection direct from suppliers of management information in response to Covid-19 to give better insight and monitor online and video consultation capabilities. NHSE estimate that 95% of practices have online consultation capability, up from 42% pre-pandemic.

2. *What assessment have you made of the number of GPs without access to an adequate internet connection?*

NHSEI are using digital tools to transform Primary Care, aligned with the NHS Long Term Plan, GP Contract and NHSX strategy.

The Primary Care (GP) Digital Services Operating Model, supports c.6800 GP practices and c.150k practice staff and clinicians, and there was approximately £9.5m additional capital investment provided to support PCNs in 2020/21. The model sets standards for GP IT services to ensure quality, safety and compatibility of systems used in general practice

and to help CCGs to commission GP Information Technology for practices. The operating model is refreshed annually with the option to include ad-hoc addendums to support operational requirements. The 21/22 version of the model is due for release on shortly, which includes additions to preserve and further support the accelerated use of digital first services, enabling PCNs and additional roles, supporting the emerging ICS landscape and standards for cloud telephony.

Health and Social Care Network (HSCN) is the essential underlying network infrastructure that underpins the use of digital technology in the NHS. All GP practices across the NHS in England have now completed HSCN migrations and now have HSCN internet connections deployed which has improved their internet bandwidth and connectivity.

*3. What assessment have you made of the number of GPs without the necessary skills to deliver remote consultations?*

The NHSEI Digital First Primary Care Team (DFPC) leads a programme of work to support practices to use digital and online tools to access general practice services. It works with professional and regulatory bodies, VCSE and patient organisations to support the safe and effective use for staff and patients of remote consultations in general practice.

DHSC is working with NHSE to learn from what has worked well and the DFPC team have an independent evaluation underway to understand the impact for staff, patients and the wider health and care system of using digital tools in primary care, including the effectiveness of online consultation systems and triage in general practice.

NHSEI DFPC team has developed multiple resources, recognising there is no one size fits all approach, to support general practice with good practice principles when carrying out remote consultations. GP practices use of remote consultations to deliver services in response to the pandemic have added complexity to the interactions between clinicians and patients. The guidance and training materials have been developed with Health Education England, the Royal Colleges, regulators and the wider health care sector. The resources ensure that clinicians and patients are protected from risks associated with remote consultations, such as maintaining professional vigilance and identifying safety and safeguarding concerns, they also support general practice to focus on patients access needs and provide care that takes account of the interests of patients. Annex A contains a list of NHSEI DFPC developed guidance and training materials.

The NHSEI Access Improvement Programme is supporting practices which have faced challenges, such as drops in appointment provision during the pandemic. The programme is drawing on the successful Time for Care programme, and its team of experienced facilitators and seeks to support practices whose patients are experiencing the greatest access challenges, including long waiting times, poor patient experience or difficulties in embedding new ways of working relating to Covid-19, such as total triage.

*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?*

The updated version of the GP IT Operating Model, due for publication shortly, and the recently published [Primary Care System Development and GPIT Funding Guidance](#) provide details of how general practice staff will be provided with equipment, services, training and support.

General Practice clinicians have been providing remote consultations to patients by telephone for many years and so there are existing skills in the workforce when it comes to remote assessment and advice.

The NHSEI Digital First Primary Care team are working with Health Education England to develop a national programme of training for clinical and non-clinical staff to support triage and remote consultations.

The NHSEI DFPC team has also provided an extensive programme of webinars to spread learning and provide advice, and it has a further webinar series with the Royal College of General Practitioners which is planned to take place in autumn 2021.

NHSEI is providing funding to commissioners to support practices with the effective implementation and use of digital tools, including supporting staff to use digital tools in their day to day work and to embed new systems into routine processes within practices.

The NHSEI DFPC has a large programme of evaluation underway, which includes evaluating the training needs of staff, alongside research to understand the approaches that work well and for whom and testing the usability and accessibility of the active online and video consultation products currently available to general practice. DHSC will continue work with NHSEI and professional bodies to build on the findings from this research and other relevant research projects to inform current and future guidance and training materials.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'S. Javid'.

**RT HON SAJID JAVID MP**

## **Annex A: DFPC developed guidance and training materials**

- [Remote versus face-to-face: which to use and when?](#) (Royal College of General Practitioners)
- [Principles for supporting high quality consultations by video in general practice during COVID-19](#) (Royal College of General Practitioners and NHSEI)
- [How to conduct written online consultations with patients in primary care](#) (British Medical Journal)
- [Key principles for intimate clinical assessments undertaken remotely in response to COVID-19](#) (NHSEI)
- Clinical safety risk templates to support general practice in mitigating risks associated with the implementation of digitally supported triage, online and video consultations
- [Advice on how to establish a remote 'total triage' model in general practice using online consultations and e-resource on remote total triage model in general practice](#) (NHSEI)
- [Supporting practice staff with a Total Digital Triage model for online consultations and Admin Crib Sheet](#)
- [Top 10 tips for COVID-19 telephone consultations](#) (Royal College of General Practitioners)
- [Guidance for general practice on confidential enquiry questions for domestic abuse during a remote consultation](#) (NHSE/I and IRISi)