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UK Health Service Not Taking Full Advantage Of Digital Self-Care Apps – PAGB Audit

by [David Ridley](#)

PAGB calls on NHS England to create a self-care section in its NHS App and reinstate its online Apps Library to promote responsible digital self-care in the UK.

The UK National Health Service could be doing more to leverage the power of digital apps to help people to self-care, according to UK consumer health industry association, PAGB.

Finding support for digital self-care lacking, PAGB reiterates as part of its [latest digital self-care audit](#) its call for NHS England to develop a self-care section in its NHS App and on the NHS website.

“Digital apps and interventions are vital in helping empower the public to learn more about and manage self-treatable conditions at home, without placing extra pressure on our already-stretched NHS services, including general practitioners and accident and emergency (A&E),” PAGB CEO Michelle Riddalls commented.

“According to our audit, use of NHS website and NHS 111 phone service is increasing year on year, but people often feel overwhelmed by the amount of content available online and don’t always know which sources are trustworthy,” Riddalls pointed out.

Self-Care Referrals Decreasing

Despite UK Government reducing funding for digital services, the British public’s use of the NHS website use has increased, with 1.2bn visits between October 2021 and September 2022.

This is a huge increase from 2019, during which the website recorded an average of 40m visits a month (approximately 480m a year), PAGB reported, indicating increased public willingness to

use this channel to access healthcare information.

Use of the NHS 111 online service has also increased since 2019, the association noted, suggesting online symptom checkers use has become more common following the pandemic.

However, the percentage of NHS 111 online sessions resulting in a recommendation to self-care in England has decreased from 25% in 2020 to 7% in 2022, their lowest point in four years.

Follow PAGB Recommendations

“We need to see the UK Government put in place the recommendations outlined in our audit, including reinstating a library of trusted health apps, so people can be reassured that they are accessing reliable, accurate and useful information,” Riddalls urged.

Published in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic in November 2020, PAGB’s first “Digital self-care audit” urged UK policy makers to help consumers find good quality information about how to self-care and use self-care apps where appropriate.

One of PAGB’s recommendations was for NHS England to develop a self-care section in the NHS App and on the NHS website. (Also see "[UK Industry Urges Policy Makers To Help People Towards Digital Self-Care Services](#)" - HBW Insight, 17 Nov, 2020.)

These dedicated self-care resources 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,” PAGB suggested at the time.

Three years on, and there is still no self-care section in the NHS App, PAGB pointed out in the 2023 audit.

Reinstate Apps Library

Meanwhile, in December 2021, the NHS decommissioned its Apps Library, with patients now immediately directed to the NHS App or NHS website.

Although PAGB’s 2020 audit found that the library focused predominantly on apps for the management of, and self-care for, long term conditions – for example, cancer and cardiovascular disease – the library was deemed by the association as a useful tool that had the potential to enhance the accessibility of accredited apps that provide self-care advice, symptom checkers and digital triage.

The decision to scrap it has resulted in a reduced number of options available to the public to access information on self-care or to use these trustworthy apps to monitor and track their

conditions. PAGB recommended, therefore, that the Library be reinstated.

“With winter approaching and more industrial action planned, it’s never been more important to give the public the tools they need to self-care for common treatable conditions such as coughs and colds,” Riddalls concluded.