

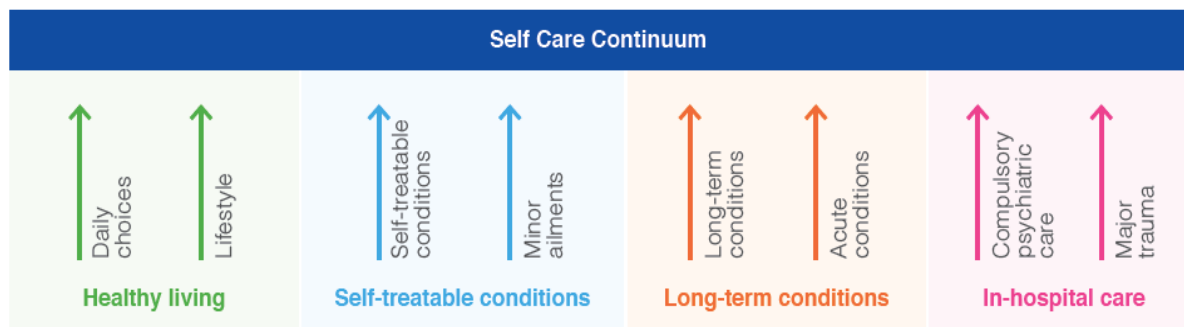
## PAGB’s Vision for Digital Self-Care

### Introduction: Self-care and the NHS digital revolution

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 or wellness. It can be described as a continuum, ranging from the promotion of everyday wellbeing and taking care of self-treatable conditions, to the management of long-term conditions and recovery after trauma.

**Dominant clinical care**  
Individual responsibility

**Dominant self-care**  
Professional responsibility



Digital health tools are key enablers of self-care. During the pandemic, public health messages encouraged people to self-care for self-treatable conditions to both minimise the spread of COVID-19 and reduce avoidable pressures on NHS services. These messages were accompanied by an acceleration in the development and use of digital and remote healthcare services that provide support and care for people without requiring face-to-face interactions. This led to a significant shift in public attitudes towards self-care, proving that when self-care messages are readily accessible and trusted, widespread behavioural change is possible. However, this trend is now in decline, with people beginning to return to their pre-pandemic behaviours.

**In PAGB’s 2022 survey, 64% of people who might not have considered self-care as their first option before the pandemic said they were more likely to do so in future. This is down from 69% in 2020.<sup>1</sup>**

As the UK emerges from the pandemic, digital health care is rightly seen as central, not only to the NHS’s recovery, but also to broader efforts to reform the NHS, tackle health inequalities and generally “build back better”. To date, however, government policies have focused on the use of digital health tools either to prevent ill health, provide medical care or manage long-term conditions, rather than to support people to self-care for self-treatable conditions and minor ailments.<sup>2</sup> As a result, a unique but time-limited opportunity to embed self-care across the health care system and subsequently reduce avoidable pressures on the NHS, may be missed.

As NHS England’s (NHSE) newly established Transformation Directorate considers its priorities for the post-pandemic era, this paper outlines how recent advancements across digital platforms and remote services can be harnessed to lock-in a longer-term shift towards self-care.

## Areas for action

Whilst many digital health technologies already facilitate self-care, there are a number of barriers and challenges which make this support less commonplace and less effective than it might otherwise be.

Since 2019, PAGB has been working with professional organisations and trade associations representing clinicians, pharmacies, and commissioners to forge a clinical consensus on how best to support self-care in England. This work culminated in the development of a [blueprint for a new self-care strategy for England](#), part of which looks at how digital health technologies can be used to their full potential.

Separately, PAGB has also been working with policy, innovator and clinical stakeholders to explore how companies developing digital products can enable the NHS to support people to self-care across the self-care continuum.

From these pieces of work, PAGB has identified three areas in digital health where targeted action could have a significant impact on the ability of the system to support self-care, and people's willingness to practise it. These are:

- Online self-care information and advice
- Digital triaging tools
- Using digital facilities to allow pharmacists to play a greater role in facilitating self-care

This paper looks at each of these in more detail.

### *Online self-care information and advice*

The demand for online health information and advice, via websites and apps, was clearly demonstrated during the pandemic. PAGB's 2022 self-care survey found that around one in eight people now look up their symptoms online more frequently than they did before the pandemic,<sup>3</sup> and, in 2021 the NHS app was the most downloaded free iOS app, with over 24 million users.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this, members of the public do not always find it easy to access reliable information and advice about self-care online. In 2020, PAGB undertook an audit of online platforms where people commonly access information about their health. It reviewed 47 websites and found that 37 of them direct users to national NHS websites for additional information on self-care. While self-care advice is available on the NHS website and the NHS App, users must navigate an alphabetised list of conditions and treatments to locate relevant information on self-care. Similarly, the audit found that the algorithm for self-care used by the NHS Apps Library, which has since been disbanded, only covered self-care for long-term conditions, not self-treatable conditions

#### **Case study: promoting self-care at the local level**

In Cheshire, the local CCG has a dedicated [self care webpage](#) to inform people what self-care is and how and when to self-care. The webpage provides specific advice on how to self-care for some of the most common self-treatable conditions, such as acne, child fever, common cold, headache and sprains. Additionally, it highlights the low cost of commonly purchased over-the-counter medicines which can be used to self-care.<sup>7</sup>

or minor ailments.<sup>5</sup> In PAGB's 2022 survey, 67% of people said that the NHS should make more information about self-care available online.<sup>6</sup>

As part of its plans to grow and improve the NHS's digital channels, NHSE's Transformation Directorate is reorganising even more of its content by condition. For example, a mental health hub was added to the NHS website last year, bringing together all NHS information and tools to support mental wellbeing in one place.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, since the NHS Apps Library has disbanded, apps are now highlighted on condition specific pages of the NHS website. While the aim of this reorganisation - to ensure the right content and products are visible in the right places for citizens - is laudable, it risks digital self-care information and tools for self-treatable conditions and minor ailments being overlooked.<sup>9</sup>

PAGB's 2020 audit found several good examples of digital self-care information and tools, and many more have been developed since, in response to the pandemic. To encourage people to self-care, these products must be easy to find, and readily available on the NHS's digital channels.

**To make digital self-care information and tools more readily available and easier to access, NHSE's Transformation Directorate should:**

- **Evaluate existing content and products, including those developed in response to the pandemic, to identify those best suited to supporting self-care**
- **Clearly signpost to these products on NHS digital channels**

### *Digital triaging tools*

The NHS has numerous 'front doors', most of which involve some form of triaging to direct people towards the right care setting. This is increasingly done online, with many GP practices and hospital trusts now using digital symptom checkers and triage systems to manage demand and allocate resources – a trend accelerated by the pandemic.

With NHS services more stretched than ever before, ensuring these digital symptom checkers and triage systems signpost people to the most appropriate service first time has never been more important. And yet, the algorithms that sit behind them are often risk averse, recommending professional care when self-care is appropriate. Out of the 25 GP practices reviewed as part of PAGB's 2020 digital self-care audit, only 12 referred or directed patients towards pharmacy care.<sup>10</sup>

During the pandemic, the NHS 111 phone service improved its algorithms to increasingly direct people towards self-care where it is appropriate.

Between April and October 2020, the proportion of calls where people were advised to consult a pharmacist, or not to attend another service, increased from 27.9% to 32.6%.<sup>11</sup>

### **Symptom Checkers: Healthily**

Healthily's [Smart Symptom Checker](#) is a self-assessment tool and app which takes into account users' symptoms, symptom combinations and influencing factors like age and lifestyle, to provide users with advice on the next best steps. This can include advice on how to self-care, where to seek medical advice, and relevant health information.

**NHSE's Transformation Directorate should evaluate symptom checkers and digital triage tools in use across the NHS to:**

- **Ensure they recommend self-care when appropriate. Those that are too risk averse should be advised to refine their algorithms in line with improvements made to the NHS 111 phone service**
- **Identify opportunities to gather data about people's behaviours to understand how people navigate digital self-care, and therefore how to encourage people to self-care more often**

### *Using digital facilities to allow pharmacists to play a greater role in facilitating self-care*

Community pharmacists are well placed to drive a holistic approach to self-care. They can help to advise people on the most effective over-the-counter treatments, as well as self-care techniques. By enabling NHS 111 and GP practices to refer patients to their community pharmacy, the Community Pharmacist Consultation Service (CPCS) has been an important initial step in encouraging people to consider community pharmacy as their first port of call for minor ailments and self-treatable conditions.

While it is critical that people are directed to community pharmacists as part of self-care where appropriate, it is equally important that community pharmacists are given the tools and information they need to support people. Recent medical history and immunisation records are already included on the summary care record, and although access varies throughout England, most pharmacies can now access this. However, pharmacists cannot routinely record the advice or medication they give people, despite receiving training on how to effectively deliver consultation services. In this regard, England lags behind other comparable nations, such as Singapore and Austria.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Case study: shared health and care records**

In Dorset, the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) has partnered with local health providers and authorities to create the [Dorset Care Record](#) (DCR). The DCR is an electronic repository providing a consolidated view of information from health and social care systems across Dorset, including registered pharmacists. One local community pharmacy in North Dorset said that DCR has helped them to improve consultations because they are aware of what treatment has been issued by other healthcare providers beforehand.<sup>14</sup>

In June 2021, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and NHSE published their draft data strategy, [Data saves lives: reshaping health and social care with data](#), which said:

*“We want to move towards a world where every doctor, surgeon, district nurse, pharmacist, allied health professional, and social care worker could draw information from, or put information into, what feels like the same shared care record, in a safe and straightforward way.”*

Since then, DHSC has published its proposals for health and care integration, which commit to providing shared care records for all citizens by 2024, but don't specifically state that pharmacists will be able to access and edit these records.<sup>15</sup>

Enabling pharmacists to write to patients' records would mean that advice and treatment given in other health settings (including by GPs and in hospital) can take general health, underlying conditions and medicines use into account, providing a consistent and comprehensive record of an individual's treatment. A recent PAGB survey found that 67% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that pharmacists should be able to update people's medical records to include any advice they have given or treatment they have recommended.<sup>16</sup>

**The Government and NHSE can better support pharmacists to encourage people to self-care by:**

- **Ensuring their plans for shared health and care records grant pharmacists write access**
- **Improving the interoperability of IT systems used across the NHS**

### **Conclusion: Ensuring everyone can benefit from digital self-care**

Self-care has many benefits. As well as helping to minimise avoidable pressures on the NHS, self-care empowers people to manage their own health and, subsequently, it can reduce health inequalities – a key focus of the Government's levelling up agenda.<sup>17</sup> And yet, it can only achieve these benefits if everyone has access to the support they need to self-care appropriately and effectively.

Digital health technologies can help to overcome some of the barriers to accessing self-care support. Between 43% and 61% of English working-age adults routinely do not understand health information,<sup>18</sup> and the Patient Information Forum's 2019/20 survey on health and digital literacy found 43% of working age adults would struggle to understand instructions to calculate a childhood paracetamol dose.<sup>19</sup> Such low levels of health literacy often prevent people from practising self-care. As health information is increasingly made available digitally, via websites, apps and electronic patient information leaflets (e-PILs) for example, it will be possible to present instructions and advice in more engaging formats, such as videos, interactive apps and games, that people may find easier to understand. Similarly, digital platforms can present information in multiple different languages quickly and sustainably, and they can allow people to access services remotely without needing to be near or travel to physical localities.

#### **Digital innovation lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic**

Communities have been innovating during COVID-19 to ensure continued access to support. GPs in [Kingston Clinical Commissioning Group \(CCG\)](#)<sup>20</sup> and [Wharfedale, Airedale and Craven GP Alliance](#)<sup>21</sup> have used YouTube style videos to help encourage self-care and reinforce the message that self-care is not 'no care' during the pandemic. Likewise, Buckinghamshire CCG has been supporting vulnerable patients to self-care by running and recording interactive healthy lifestyle sessions via Zoom.<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, it is also important to recognise that digital health tools can, in themselves, be a barrier to practising self-care. Many people do not have access to, or are not able to use, digital facilities. For these people, hybrid models of care, whereby they receive some level of support from a healthcare professional that encourages them to self-care, should be available. The CPCS is an excellent example of this, particularly given over 99% of those living in areas of the highest deprivation are within a 20-minute walk of a community pharmacy, making pharmacies an accessible resource for almost everyone.<sup>23</sup> However, as this paper has pointed out, pharmacists also need access to digital tools that support self-care to be fully effective.

Alongside the broader self-care and digital health communities, PAGB looks forward to working with DHSC and NHSE's Transformation Directorate to make the most of the opportunities digital technologies present for facilitating and encouraging self-care.

**To embed self-care across the NHS, DHSC and NHSE must maximise the opportunities presented by digital health tools by:**

- **Making digital self-care information and tools more readily available and easier to access**
- **Evaluating and improving symptom checkers and digital triage tools to make them more effective at encouraging self-care**
- **Supporting pharmacists to help people to self-care by allowing them write access to shared health and care records**

**[For more information, please contact PAGB, the consumer healthcare association on selfcare@pagb.co.uk / \[www.pagb.org.uk\]\(http://www.pagb.org.uk\)](mailto:selfcare@pagb.co.uk)**

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