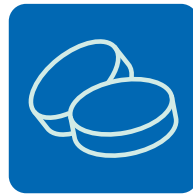




Unlocking the digital front door:

delivering digital self-care
through NHS reform



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



The Consumer
Healthcare Association



Executive summary

“As we deliver the transformational shifts in our 10 Year Plan, from hospitals to community, analogue to digital, sickness to prevention, it will have radical implications for services. Much of what’s done in hospital today will be done on the high street, over the phone or through the app in a decade’s time”¹

- Rt Hon Wes Streeting MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, NHS Confed Expo

Digital transformation is central to the Government’s vision for a modern NHS, one that is more accessible, sustainable, and personalised. As the health service recovers from a period of sustained pressure, the 10 Year Health Plan offers a clear mandate for reform, including a shift from ‘analogue to digital’ services and a commitment to make the NHS App the front door to care by 2028.^{2,3} New features such as My NHS GP, My Choices, and the Single Patient Record (SPR) aim to empower people to access services, manage their health, and make informed decisions with greater ease.²

The case for digital self-care is clear, and the timing is critical. Ensuring the Government delivers on its commitment for the new NHS App to advise on self-care, and signpost to trusted self-care information and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines, must now be a priority. With the 10 Year Health Plan setting a bold vision for reform,² there is an opportunity to embed self-care as a core function within the NHS ecosystem. The vast majority of branded OTC products available in pharmacies, supermarkets and corner shops already have websites that consumers use and trust, which are quality assured and approved by PAGB (under PAGB’s Medicines Advertising Codes in line with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency requirements).

In fact, 73% of adults say they would trust health information from an OTC brand’s website,⁴ highlighting the opportunity to connect these quality assured resources directly into NHS digital platforms. As implementation across digital structures begins through the NHS App, it is vital that these existing, quality assured websites are connected into these platforms. Prioritising self-care within this reform is essential, otherwise the system risks missing one of its most immediate and scalable levers for prevention and patient empowerment.



Each year, there are 25 million unnecessary GP appointments and 5 million avoidable A&E visits for self-treatable conditions.⁷

Encouragingly, the NHS is also a trusted digital provider for millions. PAGB's 2025 Self-Care Census revealed that 82% of respondents said they trust the NHS website or App as sources of information on self-care.⁵ In May 2024, the NHS website and NHS-owned apps were accessed by 56% of UK online adults - more than double the reach of the next most visited health site. The NHS App alone was used by 21% (10 million people), making it one of the most significant digital health platforms in the country.⁶



6 in 10 adults say
they go online when
experiencing symptoms of a
self-treatable condition

Public appetite for digital self-care is strong. PAGB's research has found that nearly six in ten adults say they go online when experiencing symptoms of a self-treatable condition such as hay fever, indigestion or muscle pain.⁵ Yet four in ten report feeling overwhelmed by the volume of information and are unsure which sources to trust, while 48% wish they knew how to spot 'fake' health information online.⁵ This highlights the opportunity for NHS platforms – already the most trusted source, with 62% of adults identifying the NHS App or website as their first port of call for self-care advice⁵ – to provide clearer, more visible and consistent self-care functionality.

At present, gaps in national coordination and local digital infrastructure are contributing to a postcode lottery, which risks widening health inequalities, particularly for people with limited digital access or literacy.⁶ While the NHS is by far the most-used online health provider in the UK, usage varies significantly across regions and income levels - for example, according to a recent report by Ofcom only 53% of internet users in lower-income and less advantaged groups access digital health services, compared to 78% in more affluent groups.⁶

Digital self-care combines scale, urgency and feasibility: millions of people already use digital tools to manage minor conditions,⁶ public trust in NHS digital platforms is high,⁵ and the groundwork for integration is largely in place.² Each year, there are 25 million unnecessary GP appointments and 5 million avoidable A&E visits for self-treatable conditions.⁷ Strengthening digital support through the NHS App and website can empower people to manage these conditions safely at home, unlocking clinical capacity, improving access, and supporting wider ambitions to shift care closer to home.

Drawing on findings from the 2025 PAGB Self-Care Census, this report outlines how digital self-care can be embedded within the delivery of the 10 Year Health Plan. It highlights strong public demand for trusted self-care tools and sets out three practical recommendations, that can be delivered at pace to drive early progress:



1. Supporting the self-care offer within the NHS App



2. Improving digital triage via the NHS App and website to support effective self-care



3. Equipping community pharmacists with digital tools and access

By embedding self-care functionality into the NHS App and supporting national rollout of proven local models, Government and system leaders can help ensure every person in England has the tools and confidence to manage their health effectively, delivering on the promise of NHS reform. Prioritising digital self-care early in the implementation of the 10 Year Health Plan is essential: embedding the ready-made websites which are already accessible, understandable and trusted by patients is one of the fastest ways to help signpost patients to appropriate self-care products, show tangible benefits for patients, and ease pressure on NHS services.



The opportunity for digital self-care in NHS reform

Self-care is the actions that people take for themselves and their families to promote and maintain good health and wellbeing, and to take care of their self-treatable conditions.

Within the context of NHS reform, digital self-care specifically refers to the use of trusted digital tools, such as the NHS App, to help people recognise symptoms, access advice, treat minor conditions, and navigate to appropriate pharmacy or community-based support. Digital self-care is about giving people the knowledge, tools and confidence to manage their health effectively, supported by accessible, evidence-based digital services.

When articulating its plan for NHS reform, we believe the Government has committed to the right overarching principles: universal access, long-term investment, patient empowerment, and delivery at pace. The platform-based approach to NHS digital infrastructure is particularly encouraging, including the development of nationally procured tools, multi-year transformation budgets, and investment in integrated capabilities to support remote monitoring, care plan management, and AI-enabled triage.²

Done well, digital self-care can help deliver on the 10 Year Health Plan's core commitments for patients, including, fast access, more choice, and reduced demand. Crucially, digital self-care also aligns with the Government's wider prevention agenda.² By enabling earlier action, improving health literacy, and helping people manage minor health concerns before they escalate, it can play a vital role in shifting the NHS from reactive treatment to proactive care.

In far too many areas of the country, digital self-care remains underdeveloped.⁵ What is more, at a national level, there is currently no dedicated self-care functionality within the NHS App. It is positive, therefore, that that 10 Year Health Plan has committed to addressing this gap.



74% of adults say they would be likely to use a dedicated self-care hub within the NHS App or website



72% of adults support better online help for minor health conditions



49% would also trust an online source more if it were recommended by the NHS

But while public trust and usage are high, NHS digital platforms remain underpowered. Existing tools often lack consistency, clear entry points, or visibility. Our self-care census shows that, of those who responded, 74% of adults say they would be likely to use a dedicated self-care hub within the NHS App or website offering clear symptom guidance, treatment options and advice on when to seek further care.⁵ Likewise, 72% of adults support better online help for minor health conditions, and more than half say they would feel comfortable using AI to support symptom checking if deployed safely, within clear boundaries and backed by regulation. Nearly half (49%) would also trust an online source more if it were recommended by the NHS, underlining the case for linking directly to regulated OTC brand websites and resources.⁵



In far too many areas of the country, digital self-care remains underdeveloped.⁵ What is more, at a national level, there is currently no dedicated self-care functionality within the NHS App

At present, however, symptom checkers and triage tools, both within the App and across primary care and NHS 111 services, often default to clinical escalation rather than safe self-care advice.⁹ And while pharmacy services are increasingly recognised as a key part of the care system, their integration into digital pathways remains limited, with current GP referral systems not always signposting patients to self-care or pharmacy as first-line options.

To overcome this challenge, the Government should use its ambition to make the NHS App the 'digital front door' to health services by 2028 as a timely opportunity to embed self-care at the heart of digital delivery.³ Signposting to regulated tools and trusted self-care information, including from brand websites and products (both of which exist in a highly regulated environment), can help deliver on this ambition swiftly and equitably, without reinventing the wheel. Importantly, public demand supports this approach: 73% of adults say they would trust health information from an OTC brand's website, underlining the value of integrating these resources into NHS digital platforms.⁴

In doing so, the Government can help ensure that every patient, in every part of the country, has access to the tools they need to manage their health, improving system resilience, reducing health inequalities, and delivering on the promise of a truly digital NHS. While policy leadership and national infrastructure set the direction, success will ultimately depend on how well digital self-care meets the needs and expectations of the public.



73% of adults say they would trust health information from an OTC brand's website



Delivering digital self-care through the 10 Year Health Plan

To realise the full potential of digital self-care, NHS reform must now shift decisively from ambition to implementation. With public expectations rising, and best practice emerging across the country, there is now an opportunity to prioritise the delivery and optimisation of self-care tools within the NHS App and other digital systems. **This must include delivering on the Government's commitment for the new NHS App to advise on self-care and signpost to trusted self-care information and OTC products.**

The following recommendations offer a practical roadmap for realising that potential. Each can be delivered within the scope of existing infrastructure, using the platforms and pathways already being advanced through the 10 Year Health Plan.



1. Support the self-care offer within the NHS App

The NHS App represents a major opportunity to embed self-care more visibly in the patient journey. To achieve this, the self-care functionality should be developed with clarity, simplicity, and real-world use in mind.

That starts with content. The NHS App should draw on trusted, evidence-based guidance on common self-treatable conditions and OTC treatments, helping users understand what they can manage safely at home, which products or support might help, and when further care is needed.

This could include access to electronic Patient Information Leaflets (ePILs) providing clear guidance on how and when to use medicines, possible side effects, and when to seek further care. As highlighted in the Government's Life Sciences Sector Plan, exploring how to use technological approaches to move to "user-centred, digital-first information that is inclusive and accessible for all" is key.⁸ Adopting a digital-first approach for patient information leaflets for medicines and integrating these into the NHS App could have several benefits for both patients and the environment.

To ensure relevance and accuracy, content development should involve NHS England's App team working in partnership with the Department of Health and Social

Care (DHSC), pharmacy stakeholders, as well as PAGB as representatives of the OTC industry. Together, they should agree and develop the information and guidance to be provided through the NHS App, including linking directly to trusted and quality assured OTC brand websites and regulated products, as set out in the 10 Year Health Plan. Navigation should make it easy for users to move seamlessly between symptom guidance, pharmacy support, self-care information, and other NHS services, ensuring people have access to trusted advice and solutions at the point of need.

A national public awareness campaign, led by DHSC and NHS England, could support uptake by encouraging people to use the NHS App as a first step in managing minor health concerns. Campaign development should involve collaboration with pharmacy bodies and industry partners to ensure it reflects the needs of diverse users. PAGB members are already experienced in communicating with consumers in clear, accessible language, and can play a key role in amplifying Government messaging, thereby helping to encourage usage of the NHS App and build public confidence in its self-care functionality. PAGB and its members are committed to supporting DHSC and NHS England in developing and delivering such a campaign.



2. Improve digital triage tools to promote self-care where appropriate

The way people are triaged when they first seek help has a powerful effect on the choices they make and the demand that flows into the system. Yet many digital triage systems, including NHS 111 online, still direct a relatively low proportion of users towards self-care options - only 8% of NHS 111 online sessions result in a self-care outcome, despite many queries relating to minor, self-treatable conditions.⁹ In contrast, 40% are triaged by NHS 111 online to primary care and 12% to emergency treatment,⁹ reinforcing a tendency toward clinical escalation and contributing to avoidable demand across the system.



Only **8%** of NHS 111
online sessions result in a
self-care outcome



40% are triaged by NHS 111
online to primary care and
12% to emergency treatment

NHS England should review and refine existing digital triage pathways to ensure they reflect the full potential of self-care and pharmacy, maintaining robust safety standards while improving access and reducing avoidable demand. This would allow people with self-treatable conditions to access trusted self-care advice and pharmacy services, while maintaining clear escalation routes where needed. Improvements should include better integration of OTC treatment options and greater visibility of pharmacy services. Some of this information may already exist on the NHS website (for example, guidance for ingrown toenails), but the NHS App needs to ensure that this information can also be accessed via a search mechanism. This would mean that people who already know their condition can find out how to care for themselves.

As such, there are two ways to ensure digital support for self-care is appropriate:



For people who are unsure about their symptoms: triage and signposting should guide them through symptoms, helping them understand what they may have and how best to manage it, including safe self-care where appropriate.



For people who already know their condition: the NHS App should provide a simple search mechanism that directs them to trusted information on how to treat their condition, including links to evidence-based self-care guidance and websites with regulated OTC product information.

By covering both scenarios, digital platforms can ensure people get the right level of support, whether they are seeking help with symptoms or confirming how to treat a known condition, while strengthening the role of self-care in relieving pressure across the system.

These improvements should sit alongside wider changes to digital access in primary care. The recent GP contract updates require the 'front door' to general practice to be digital-first, and as GPs triage these online forms (e.g. eConsults), there is an opportunity to ensure that clinical pathways – including digital pathways – routinely recommend self-care and pharmacy wherever clinically appropriate, helping reduce unnecessary appointments and improving patient choice.

This work should build on local system experience, including from Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) and general practices that have piloted effective self-care pathways. NHS England should work closely with DHSC and clinical leads to ensure changes are clinically safe, consistent, and user-centred.



3. Equip pharmacists to play a stronger digital role in self-care

Pharmacists already play a vital role in enabling self-care, particularly through the national rollout of Pharmacy First, however, they are not yet fully integrated into NHS digital pathways. Strengthening this integration could help shift more demand away from GP and emergency care, while improving patient access to timely advice and treatment.

While NHS 111 and GP practices can already refer to pharmacists for specific self-treatable conditions, patient-initiated referrals via digital platforms (e.g. the NHS App) remain limited. Future platform development should allow individuals to select pharmacy as their preferred first point of contact where appropriate, based on minor symptom presentation.

Pharmacists should be able to document consultations, interventions and outcomes digitally in a way that links to wider NHS data systems. This will strengthen evidence for the value of pharmacy in prevention and early intervention and inform commissioning and resourcing decisions.

Finally, continued national and local communications are needed to ensure the public understands how and when to use Pharmacy First services. Clinicians, particularly in general practice, should also be supported to confidently refer patients to pharmacists where appropriate.

Pharmacists should be able to document consultations, interventions and outcomes digitally in a way that links to wider NHS data systems.





From ambition to action

The case for digital self-care is clear and the timing is critical. Ensuring the Government delivers on its commitment for the new NHS App to advise on self-care and signpost to trusted self-care information and OTC products must now be a priority.

With the 10 Year Health Plan setting a bold vision for reform,² the opportunity now is to embed self-care as a core function of the evolving NHS. Implementation is already underway across digital infrastructure, with the NHS App being developed to become the front door to services.² But unless self-care is prioritised within this reform, the system risks missing one of its most immediate and scalable levers for prevention and patient empowerment.

Public appetite is strong, and trust in NHS digital platforms is high.^{2,5} Scaling digital self-care would not require new legislation or major structural change - the tools and mechanisms already exist. This is not about reinventing the wheel, but about delivering on the commitments the Government and NHS have already made.

The move to a 'digital-by-default' NHS, as outlined in the 10 Year Health Plan,² makes self-care an essential pillar of delivery. When implemented properly, digital self-care not only improves access and eases pressure on services but also helps reduce inequalities by giving people the confidence, information, and tools to manage their health more independently.

As NHS England and DHSC work to deliver digital reform, they should view self-care not as a separate workstream, but as a unifying thread that supports prevention, improves access, and increases efficiency across services. Self-care can help ensure that the NHS App becomes the first place people turn to when they have a health concern, not just for booking appointments, but for resolving issues independently wherever appropriate.

PAGB stands ready to support this delivery, working alongside NHS Digital, national policymakers, pharmacy partners, and consumer healthcare brands to help scale what works. Embedding digital self-care into NHS reform will be essential to ensuring that the ambitions of the 10 Year Health Plan are not just stated but realised.

Public appetite is strong, and trust in NHS digital platforms is high.^{2,5} Scaling digital self-care would not require new legislation or major structural change - the tools and mechanisms already exist.

Further information



To find out more or to discuss this report further, please contact Farhana Hawthorn (she/her), Director of Policy and Public Affairs at PAGB: farhana.hawthorn@pagb.co.uk.



Unlocking the digital front door:
delivering digital self-care through NHS reform



References

1. Department of Health and Social Care, [Our vision for a new model of NHS care](#), 2025
2. NHS England, [Fit for the Future: 10 Year Health Plan for England](#), 2025
3. Department of Health and Social Care, [Managing healthcare easy as online banking with revamped NHS App](#), 2025
4. PAGB, The Self-Care Census 2024: [Consumer trends in self-treatable conditions, confidence and access](#), 2024
5. PAGB, The Self-Care Census 2025: [Exploring consumer trends in self-treatable conditions and self-care practices](#), 2025
6. Ofcom, [Online Nation 2024 Report](#), 2024
7. Frontier economics, [The economic impact of over-the-counter products in the UK](#), 2023
8. UK Government, [Life Sciences Sector Plan](#), 2025
9. NHS England, [NHS 111 online statistics](#), June 2025



The Consumer Healthcare Association

PAGB, New Penderel House, 283-288 High Holborn, London WC1V 7HP

Registered in England and Wales. Company no. 00375216. © September 2025

www.pagb.co.uk | info@pagb.co.uk

