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CONTACT US DIRECTLY

Do you have an experience of digital exclusion you would be willing to share with us, or an example of how you've been helped to get online?

We would love to hear from you.

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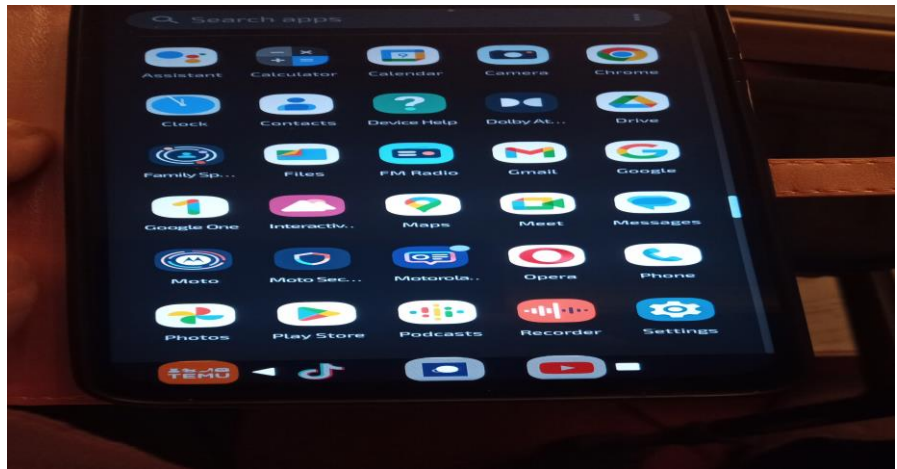
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New NHS App will cut waiting lists

The NHS App is to be updated to give patients greater power over when and how they will receive treatment.

The proposal is among a raft of ideas announced by the government to deliver its Plan for Change, slash waiting lists and cut waiting times to 18 weeks by the end of this parliament.

The upgraded App will enable patients not requiring emergency elective treatment to choose providers, book appointments in more settings and receive test results.

The Department of Health said patients will be able to:

- View and manage appointments at a time and place that is convenient to them, reducing missed appointments, which are costly to the NHS – in 2023/24, there were 8 million missed appointments in elective care.
- Choose from a wide range of providers, including in the independent sector.
- Book diagnostic tests through the NHS App at convenient locations, such as Community Diagnostic Centres (CDCs) in a local shopping centre.

Receive test results quickly through the App before choosing the next step – whether a remote consultation or surgery – at a convenient time and location. As a first step, by March 2025, patients at over 85% of acute trusts will be able to view appointment information via the NHS App.

Health and Social Care Secretary, Wes Streeting said: “Our plan will reform the NHS so patients are fully informed every step of the way through their care, given proper choice to go to a different provider for a shorter wait, and put in control of their own healthcare.”

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EDITORIAL

Happy New Year!

Welcome to the first issue of our *Connections for All* newsletter for 2025 - which will be a landmark year for the NPC as it changes its structure to become a Not for Profit Company Limited by Guarantee.

It will also be a landmark year for the NHS with the government publishing its new NHS 10 Year Plan in the spring. The Digital Working Party along with the Health and Social Care Working Party compiled the NPC's response to the consultation which was submitted by the early December deadline for organisations.

However, there's still time for individuals to comment on the plan and sign up to public engagement consultation events throughout England.

Dr Malte Gerhold, director of innovation and improvement at the Health Foundation, said: "It is only with the public's support that the government will successfully achieve its ambition of shifting the NHS from analogue to digital.

The Patients Association is actively encouraging people to respond, and so is the NPC's digital working party. This month (January) the government will be updating its website. For more information go to: change.nhs.uk/en-GB/ to register.

Please also write to us to comment on anything related to digital inclusion and exclusion, and also what issues you think the digital working party and the NPC should be prioritising in 2025. We look forward to hearing from you.

Jenny Sims
Editor

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New NHS App will reduce waiting lists

He added: "This government's reform agenda will take the NHS from a one size fits all, top down, 'like it or lump it' service, to a modern service that puts patients in the driving seat and treats them on time – delivering on our Plan for Change to drive a decade of national renewal." NHS chief executive Amanda Pritchard said: "NHS staff are providing record levels of elective care but with too many patients waiting, we know we need to reform further and faster so we can take our progress on the backlog to the next level. "Using technology to revolutionise access to NHS care, alongside offering more availability of tests, check and scans closer to people's homes will help us tackle waiting times and put patients in the driving seat of elective care."

She added, measures to improve two-way communication between patients and clinicians, as well as making better use of AI to predict missed appointments, could also save an additional one million missed appointments.

Reducing digital inclusion

The UK Government has set up a Digital Inclusion Action Committee and appointed Baroness Hilary Armstrong as chair.

Armstrong's [GOV.UK biography](https://www.gov.uk/biography/hilary-armstrong) says the committee is an external advisory body made up of national and local experts to scrutinise, steer and help determine the work of the Government in reducing digital exclusion. It will work closely with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

Previously a Labour MP from 1987 to 2010, having been chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, minister for the Cabinet Office and minister for social exclusion under Prime Minister Tony Blair, she oversaw the Government's Action Plan on Social Exclusion and established the New Deal for Communities.

The UK Authority website says: "The creation of the committee reflects the increasing importance of digital inclusion on the agenda of all levels of government, due to its strong influence on social inclusion and the ability of people to take up digital services."

Libraries Connected

Libraries Connected, the public libraries membership body, has signed an agreement with the Good Things Foundation (GTF) charity to work closer together to fix the digital divide.

The two organisations have signed a Memorandum of Understanding aimed at: "Leveraging each other's strength, voice, unique positioning, expertise, and reach to jointly explore and advance solutions to exclusion in a digital and AI age."

The agreement commits both charities to working collaboratively on projects identified by library leaders and digital inclusion experts. The agreement builds on a history of partnership-working between Libraries Connected and Good Things, which last year published [a joint report on libraries and digital inclusion](#).

Many public libraries also benefit from the [National Databank](#) and [National Device Bank](#) and deliver GTF's free [Learn My Way](#) digital skills learning platform.

Helen Milner OBE, GTF's Group Chief Executive, said: "This partnership between Libraries Connected and Good Things Foundation is a brilliant example of how collaboration can tackle digital exclusion head-on. By combining our strengths and expertise, we're creating opportunities to ensure everyone can benefit from the digital age.

"Public libraries play a vital role as community-based hubs for digital inclusion, and together, we can help more people access essential digital skills and services.

"Fixing the digital divide is at the heart of what we do, and partnerships like this enable us to deliver even greater impact, helping build a digitally inclusive future for all."

The organisations hope that the partnership will produce insights and evidence that can inform a future national strategy for digital inclusion.

As well as providing free internet access and PC use, public libraries are a leading provider of digital skills support, often in partnership with charities and educational organisations.

This role has been recognised by Lords Communications and Digital Committee, whose [report on digital exclusion](#) recommended greater investment in libraries as community-based digital inclusion hubs.

Most recently, [Building Digital UK's analysis](#) of Get Online Week, GTF's flagship annual digital inclusion campaign, stressed the importance of public libraries in collaborative work that seeks to close the digital divide.

Isobel Hunter MBE, chief executive of Libraries Connected, said: "We're hugely excited about this partnership and the new opportunities it will bring. Like Good Things Foundation, we're committed to ensuring everyone can benefit from what's available online.

"Libraries play a vital role in tackling digital exclusion, providing free access to computers, delivering digital skills training and supporting people to access digital services. This agreement brings that practical experience and community knowledge together with Good Things Foundation's deep understanding of digital inclusion.

"By sharing and collaborating we hope to make an even bigger impact for the people that need it most."

Sir Chris Bryant MP, minister responsible for both public libraries and digital inclusion, [recently stated](#) that public libraries will be central to a: "*more coherent and effective strategy for digital inclusion.*"

Keeping up to date

Find out how the Good Things Foundation is progressing with its strategic ambition of [helping 1 million people](#) benefit from digital by the end of 2025. Digital Futures For Good has been its flagship conversation series where guests look to a future with no digital exclusion.

Chief Executive, Helen Milner sat down with thought leaders, policy makers and experts from across society to highlight best practices in digital inclusion and find out what they think should be done to fix the digital divide. A report on the series will be launched at an online event on 28th January, 12.30-1.30pm. [Sign up to the launch](#)

Do you know what's coming down the digital line?

Jeff Richards, NPC Wales' Digital Champion and a former BT engineer, offers some useful insights and advice.

Are you aware that all digital 'phone lines work by being supplied with mains electricity? Who provides and pays for this supply? You.

But I hear you say: "Why is this, I don't own this line, I merely rent it?" You are correct, but you are still responsible for supplying and maintaining an electrical feed to your telephone hub.

When you are finally transferred onto a digital line your communication provider, whoever that might be, will provide you with a home hub. For your telephone to work this home hub will require it to be connected to the electrical network.

Researching the internet suggests that as of December 2024, the electrical usage of these hubs is £40 per year; this will be in addition to the cost of your telephone bill. When digital poverty has been previously discussed, I don't think that the general public has been made aware of this fact.

BT/EE or Openreach have access to a database of customers who are badged as vulnerable (in future they could be badged as customers who require "supported journeys"). To support these customers Openreach have created a "prove telecare" trial which starts this month.

How will this "prove telecare" work? At the request of a vulnerable customer, after a transfer from an analogue to digital line, an engineer will visit a customer's premises to ensure that that customer's line is working. Following a successful trial, it is likely that the process could be in operation by the spring of this year, 2025.

If you are a BT/EE customer and you have any questions you wish to raise on these issues, you can attend a BT engagement event anywhere around the country

I have attended a couple of these events. You do not have to be invited, you can simply turn up. Many, but not all of these events are held in local libraries. My experience is that conversations are informal and are held around a small coffee table.

To find the dates, times and locations of these events you can access the BT/EE web site <https://www.bt.com/broadband/digital-voice/events>

(Jeff Richards is also a member NPC Wales Executive)

Poor communications blamed Elizabeth Anderson, CEO of the Digital Poverty Alliance, expressed concerns about the digital switchover in an interview with the editor of the UK Authority website.

She claimed the pledges of telecoms operators to protect vulnerable people using safety alarms in their homes as the public switched telephone network (PSTN) is replaced by digital lines do not go far enough, and criticised their "poor communications." And added: "People don't understand what they are being sold. Full fibre, gigabits and upload speeds are often meaningless terms if you are an older person being told you have to pay for something new.

"We welcome DSIT's (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology) [intervention and focus on improving broadband connectivity](#) across the UK, and their role in bringing together leading telecoms players to shape the future of accessibility.

"However, more broadly, there are still so many confusing messages for customers who may not fully understand the impact of the switchover. To complicate it further, customer facing staff are often not trained to talk to vulnerable customers in simple language that makes sense to them".

"We need to use this as an opportunity to provide skills and resilience. The paid engineer visit on migration is all well and good, but while to most people it's second nature to 'turn it off and on again', this is not something lots of older people previously have needed to do. They won't know they need to keep a mobile charged that they never use."

"If this is going to be mandated, we have to show people what to do and help them."
www.ukauthority.com/articles/finding-new-approaches-towards-digital-inclusion/



REGIONS: WALES

Have Your Say

Rhian Bowen-Davies, the new Older People's Commissioner for Wales, has identified "ensuring older people can access the information, services and support they need" as a key priority for action during her term of office.

Launching a questionnaire to get people's views, she said: "I want Wales to lead the way in empowering older people, tackling inequality and enabling everyone to live and age well, and as Commissioner I will play a key part in making this vision a reality by delivering a robust and responsive work programme shaped by older people's voices and experiences.

"The hugely valuable conversations I've had with hundreds of older people across Wales about the changes and improvements they want to see have helped me to identify four key national outcomes that will provide a focus and strategic approach to the action I will take as Commissioner, as well as the wide range of action needed from public bodies."

The four outcomes aim to ensure that older people can:

- Access the information, services and support they need
- Feel safe in their relationships, homes and communities
- Are treated fairly and their contribution is recognised and valued
- Can make their voices heard and have meaningful choice and control.

The Commissioner added: "Delivering these outcomes will be crucial to ensure older people can have a good quality of life – both now and in the future – and that older people's rights are upheld, something that remains a key focus of my work."

She added: "I want to hear from as many people as possible about the action that would help to improve older people's lives, and the ways my work can support the delivery of these outcomes".

Older people can make their voice heard by completing a short questionnaire to highlight something they are concerned or worried about, or share an example of something that works well and makes a positive difference that could be introduced in other parts of Wales.

Comments can be based on personal experiences, of family and friends, or others. The questionnaire is available at:

www.olderpeople.wales/haveyoursay People can also call the Commissioner's team on 03442 640 670 for a form or if they prefer, to talk about their experiences.

7% not online

The level of digital exclusion in Wales is higher than in the UK; 7% of the population (170,000 people) do not use the internet. Digitally excluded people are some of the heaviest users of health and social care services, so risk being left behind in the digital health revolution, say Digital Communities Wales.

They say: "Organisations which work with the public, particularly in the health and care sector, need to think about how to increase digital inclusion so that everyone in Wales can benefit."

<https://www.digitalcommunities.gov.wales/about-digital-communities-wales/>

The Welsh Government first published its Delivery Plan for a Digital Strategy in 2021, pledging to: "Work with all sectors to ensure alternative options for engaging are available for everyone and designed to the same standard as those expected of digital."

Willing to share?

Three quarters (75%) of the public support sharing some of their personal health data for the development of AI systems in the NHS, according to a survey commissioned by think tank, the Health Foundation.

The polling, conducted in June and July 2024, which was [published on 3 December 2024](#), featured responses from more than 7,000 members of the public across the UK aged 16 and older. Results show that 59% were willing to share data on areas such as their eye health, 58% on medicines they are taking, and 57% on long-term illnesses they live with.

However, only 47% were willing to share smart phone tracked data such as sleep activity and 44% to share sexual health information.

Dr Malte Gerhold, director of innovation and improvement at the Health Foundation, said: "It is only with the public's support that the government will successfully achieve its ambition of shifting the NHS from analogue to digital.

Outsmart the scammers

The Which? Scam Alert Team say their alerts can help you spot and avoid the latest scams. Their Scam Alerts service is free: [sign up here](#) to receive information directly to your inbox.

A recent article titled, *6 things I would never do as a data expert*, warns: "Clicking a button, logging into a website and placing an shopping order are all examples of when you share your data online. And while this isn't inherently bad, it can leave you vulnerable to scams if you're not careful." It adds: "Find out the [six things our scams expert Tali Ramsey will never do with her personal data](#) to help her stay ahead of the fraudsters." This includes the advice when upgrading your phone, laptop or tablet: "It's important to delete the data on your old device before recycling it".

To wipe any data on phones and laptops click 'restore to factory settings' (first making sure you move across any data you don't want to lose). This reset will return the device to the state in which you bought it.

Do you have an old laptop, tablet or phone to recycle? Many libraries like Southwark offer information and some even run their own schemes. Check them out!



LETTERS

Hi NPC, as requested here are my experiences of digital exclusion. I've missed out on online consultations & on learning how to do zoom. Also on how to use a tablet. This is because there is very little 4G signal where I live & no 5G, they haven't rolled this out in my area yet. I have bought a 5G phone & live in hope! I've also missed out on my autism assessment, I am in my late 70s & have so far waited 3 years for this. I could do with the support I've missed out on all my life. We can't have Smart meters where I live either but that's ok I don't want one!

Ankaret Harmer West Midlands