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SCOTLAND, UNITED KINGDOM

**NEAR ME VIDEO
CONSULTATIONS DURING
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

BACKGROUND

The video consultation service Near Me was set up in Scotland in 2016 as part of the wider Technology Enabled Care (TEC) programme set up by the Scottish Government. The TEC programme was established in 2014 to contribute to and encourage the adoption of technology for the improvement of health- and social-care services and to promote patient-centred care.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Near Me was a relatively small programme that mainly focused its services in rural and island areas in Scotland, helping people to access health services and reducing the need to travel long distances for medical appointments. In March 2020, Near Me was quickly scaled up to accelerate its use across Scotland as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Near Me is now being used in all of Scotland's National Health



Service (NHS) Board areas, both in primary and secondary care, and plans are in place to expand it to other services and settings, including housing associations, volunteers, care homes and social services.

THE TECHNOLOGY



Near Me is a video consultation service that enables people to access health- and social-care services remotely from home or a place of convenience. It runs on a free and confidential web-based platform called Attend Anywhere, which people can access using their own device – a laptop, tablet or

mobile phone. It utilizes WebRTC (Web Real-Time Communication) technology, which enables the transfer of real-time media communications, such as voice, video and data, between browsers and devices. The use of the service does not require patients to download an app or create an account. Instead, patients are provided with a website address to access a virtual online waiting area, where service providers meet them for video consultations. This process has been designed to follow the ways people usually attend in-person appointments, with established work flows and processes.

In 2017, NHS Highland began testing and implementing the use of Near Me. Its roll-out was not a replication of the original project, but was codesigned with the public and health-care professionals to improve its implementation (Beattie et al., 2020).

IMPACT

Near Me played an important role in the Scottish health system's ability to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by helping to tackle massive surge scenarios and maintaining continuity in the delivery of essential services. In the context of the pandemic, the main benefits of Near Me included increased service delivery capacity, lower infection risk, protection of health workforce, improved access to care, and reduced travel.

The importance of Near Me also became evident through its increased uptake. In February 2020, approximately 300 Near Me consultations took place per week. By June 2020, 17 000 Near Me consultations were taking place each week, and this high level of use has been maintained ever since. Hospital and community-care services account for 77% of Near Me appointments, and general practitioner services for 23% (Wherton & Greenhalgh, 2021). Since the beginning of the pandemic, over 50 medical specialties have used Near Me. Between March and June 2020, 27% of Near Me's activity was related to psychiatry/psychology services, 10% to community mental health services and 9% to physiotherapy services (Wherton & Greenhalgh, 2021).

To evaluate the effectiveness of Near Me and assess its impact on equality, the Scottish Government sought views from the public and healthcare professionals, receiving feedback from over 5000 people (Scottish Government, 2020a). Responses came from primary, secondary and community services, as well as doctors, nurses and allied health professionals (such as physiotherapists, midwives, dentists and psychologists). The overwhelming majority – 87% of the public and 94% of clinicians – supported the use of video consultation for health and care appointments during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Older people and those responding to the survey by phone or letter also by far supported video consulting. The study also showed that health professionals preferred video consultations for the management of existing conditions and were less supportive of digital tools for undiagnosed conditions or first presentation of conditions/pain.

Despite this positive response, certain barriers still prevent some people from using and benefitting from the video consultations, including lack of or poor connectivity, poor digital skills, and lack of space for privacy during video calls. The equality impact assessment identified four main barriers to accessing the Near Me service (Scottish Government, 2020b):

- assumptions of clinicians or organizations that video appointments are not appropriate for certain cohorts, resulting in limited use by certain groups;
- lack of a safe and confidential space to have a video consultation, especially for young people in a house with others, carers or those with disabilities and situations where domestic violence occurs;
- lack of inclusive communication of Near Me information and patient resources for those whose first language is not English, who have a learning disability or who have low literacy; and
- risk of digital exclusion, particularly of older people, minority ethnic populations, homeless people, rural and remote communities, and those with low socioeconomic status.

As a result of the success of Near Me, a further pilot is being carried out in the social work and social services sector with a view to wider roll-out across these services. Additional support is being offered to academic institutions teaching allied health, nursing/midwifery, dental and pharmacy students so that they are skilled in using Near Me once qualified.

Furthermore, pilot Community Hubs have been introduced to support vulnerable groups and people with low levels of digital and health literacy with a view to wider roll-out of the Near Me programme. They have provided support to reception staff in primary care, helping them have conversations with patients to better offer Near Me as a choice. There are also plans to further engage the public to raise awareness of Near Me as an option they should be offered when seeking help from public services.

KEY LEARNING

- **Established digital services helped NHS Scotland to be better prepared for the public health emergency.**
- **Rapid, small-scale quality improvement projects enabled testing and subsequent roll-out and publication of guidance for Near Me.**
- **Providing digital learning opportunities such as webinars enabled clinicians to increase their knowledge, skills and confidence in using Near Me (Holdsworth et al., 2021).**
- **Future digital health interventions should focus on addressing barriers to access, including low digital literacy, financial hardship and internet connectivity, and on expanding the programme by, for example, improving digital services in care homes to enable the use of Near Me.**
- **It is crucial to understand how the use of Near Me for the purposes of infection control could be maintained and made fit-for-purpose after the COVID-19 emergency subsides.**

MORE INFORMATION

Near Me website: <https://www.nearme.scot/>

NHS Near Me videos: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpY55mgq3tUtHad8lReHt5w>

Scotland's Digital Health and Care Strategy: enabling, connecting and empowering: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-digital-health-care-strategy-enabling-connecting-empowering>

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