

# CASE STUDY

## Online consultation

### THE BACKGROUND

We were asked by West Essex CCG to manage the process to select a new online consultation system to be used by GPs across the area. The organisation works with thirty-two GP practices across the geography to ensure that they are delivering care in the most effective way for the patients in their area. Having worked with the CCG on their overall digital strategy, we already had good relationships across the group.

### THE CHALLENGE

We had a very tight timeframe, just four months to evaluate and test the systems available on the NHS procurement framework. Levels of understanding, expectation and support were extremely varied across the GP practices. The aim of online consultation is to make it easier and less time consuming for patients to access primary care and save administrative time for practices. However, there were a lot of concerns about what a new way of accessing GPs would mean for the already stretched practice teams. Critically, we needed to understand how the practices operated and the conflicting demands on the service to make recommendations that would genuinely help the GPs to deliver care to the public, rather than taking up additional time and resources.

### WHAT DID WE DELIVER?

#### Stakeholder engagement

We built a strong network of interested parties across the GP practices. These GPs and Practice Managers became a working group and helped to deliver the project. In addition, we kept everyone who needed to input into the design or would be affected by the process engaged and informed.

#### Requirement definition

Early on, we were able to move the project from a position where the majority of stakeholders didn't fully understand online consultation to a point where we had a clear, shared definition and view of priorities. To achieve this, we ran a programme of consultation; reaching out widely through events such as drop-in meetings for staff, patient participation groups and by attending existing events and meetings wherever possible.

## Project management

In line with the national programme of work, we established a series of milestones as the basis for our delivery plan, communications and activities. Working with senior stakeholder groups, particularly within healthcare, forward planning was essential to secure time in with key individuals for meetings against a strict timetable.

## Technical solution and process analysis

We analysed the technical and functional components of each of the online consultation systems available on the Government framework. We distilled this information into a simple matrix to make it easy to compare the different systems. We also ran a structured review process using online demos with our working group. This enabled us to produce a report of recommendations and a short-list of three systems. Importantly, the report put the recommendations into context in-line with the CCG's overall digital strategy as well as the wider environment such as NHS 111 online.

## Solution testing and pilot

On our recommendation, the CCG worked with us to test the preferred system before moving to procurement. We worked with six practices for the trial, covering 80,000 patients. This included the practical set up of the system as well as ensuring that appropriate information governance sign off was in place. We worked with the supplier to organise training for the staff involved in the trial. It was important to build understanding and overcome initial resistance by taking the time to fully understand how the processes at each site differed and help the teams to see how the technology could work for them to create efficiencies.

## WHAT DID WE ACHIEVE?

Through extensive stakeholder engagement we allowed the CCG to explore and understand collectively what they most wanted from an online consultation system. We were able to establish critical requirements for functionality that would help to streamline work rather than increase demands on the service. For example, through effective triaging and signposting of patients to other sources of care. The pilot approach was an extremely useful learning experience for future implementation. Following the pilot, the CCG formally selected the product to roll out across all GP practices and commissioned our team to deliver the implementation.

## WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Seven months after starting the pilot, the roll-out continues across all practices with the system now live across the majority of sites. Over 15,500 patients have registered to use the system to date and the number is rising steadily as we start to actively promote the service to patients. Importantly, usage has confirmed that when patients assess their symptoms through the system, around 30% do not require an appointment. This is a significant saving in terms of time for the practice.

We continue to work with the practices as they increase usage, particularly in light of the Coronavirus pandemic. The system can identify individuals with Coronavirus symptoms and provide up to date advice automatically. In addition to this, the data on potential cases is extremely valuable intelligence for the health system.

The chosen solution meets the new NHS England requirement for triage first model for primary care, but this is a significant change for many practices. We are therefore working to help build consensus and ensure that the system can fully support the differing operational models of each practice. We are also continuing to work closely with the supplier to feedback important system changes that will help more practices to derive further benefits from working in this new way.