

## Key Messages



## Digitally Healthy: Health Literacy and Health Inequalities

### A third sector online event with NHS NES Digital Service 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2020

#### Background and Aims

This Zoom discussion was the second instalment in collaboration with NHS National Education Scotland (NES) Digital Service, organised by VHS to help explore health literacy, health inequalities and the development of digital health. The first event (on 9<sup>th</sup> April) explored the nature of the digital divide during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis: see the [Key Messages](#). At the subsequent event, on 23<sup>rd</sup> June, we focused on health literacy and health inequalities in the digital context. We were joined by 45 participants from a wide range of voluntary and statutory health organisations. Chaired by Claire Stevens, Chief Executive of VHS, it began with a presentation from NES Digital, followed by questions and responses.

#### **Blythe Robertson, General Manager, Policy and Partnerships, NES Digital Service**

Blythe Robertson gave a short introduction setting the scene. He explained that NHS NES is a Special Health Board with an education and workforce remit. NES Digital Service is a new department that is focused on the Digital Health and Care Strategy, which aims to reduce digital fragmentation across the health system in Scotland. An understanding of the digital challenges that organisations face across the health and voluntary health sectors, as well as the challenges facing individuals most at risk and vulnerable, must inform the strategic development of digital health.

Blythe stressed that digital health and health literacy must work hand in hand, and drew everyone's attention to [Making It Easier: A Health Literacy Action Plan for Scotland, 2017- 25](#) This builds on the 2014 Making It Easy action plan which challenged the health and care system to remove the barriers that get in the way when we try to improve our wellbeing, and raised awareness amongst the workforce of the hidden problem of health literacy and how to respond better.

Blythe discussed the need for creating empathy in a technology obsessed world and the importance of this being a collective endeavour. Technology is often created with the biases of those that create it – there is a need for a more diverse group of people

to be involved in the creation of technology and for the acknowledgment that imperfections need to be fixed from the outset. So rather than technological development being purely within the domain of those specialist knowledge there is a need to make technology simpler to engage with.

The NES Digital Service is driven by three core aims of the Scottish Government's Digital Health Strategy, and they use these to develop digital products.

1. the right information, at the right time, at the point of care
2. common architecture to allow for innovation
3. data at scale for research and quality

NES Digital Service develops a range of digital products based on a "kind technology" approach, to support people with a diverse range of needs. This means ensuring products are safe and secure, well-designed, respectful and inclusive and good!

The design of technology needs to have responsiveness to barriers, challenges and needs at its very centre. This can be achieved through cross-sectoral working with the public, third and private sectors to ensure tech is useful and meets people's needs.

### **Questions and comments, with responses from NES Digital Service**

Kate Burton, Scottish Public Health Network – Have barriers to the physical use of technology, for example, by older people due to sensory issues been considered?

Response – It is important to acknowledge that digital isn't for everyone and that services must be responsive to everyone's needs. The design of devices needs to be developed alongside a range of service users so that their needs can be considered.

Allyson McCollam, VHS - How can you ensure that you reach more people without reinforcing inequalities by going digital?

Response – The aim is for digital technology to support the majority of people and for resources to then be freed up and channelled to support those who need more face-to-face or detailed support. Digital can also be used to automate things such as letters to people who cannot access information online.

Mary Ellmers, Parkinson's UK – COVID-19 has accelerated the uptake of digital technology and services are now being provided online. However, this doesn't suit everyone especially those with conditions such as Parkinson's.

Response – Digital technology is being utilised so that resources can be freed up to provide personalised "high touch" services for those falling through the gaps of digital provision. The digital services and products are being designed using Equalities Impact Assessments to ensure they meet people's needs as best as possible.

Joanna Clark, Fife Voluntary Action – There is a need to broaden engagement with people so that we can design better rather than tweaking things we it is too late.

Response – NES Digital is using these platforms to engage with third sector and wider to ensure that our ideology resonates and we can capture better learning.

Nick Jedrzejewski, See Me – During COVID-19 we have realised that we are not able to connect with everyone. However, we are unable to identify the different demographics we are unable to reach.

Response – NES Digital have been providing the SMS service for those who are shielding. Where over 100,000 people of a 180,000 population have signed up to receive advice and information. Using this service to learn about needs and looking at the demographic breakdown of those who have not signed up, to better understand why they are not engaging and to remove barriers to engagement.

Alan Eagleson, Terrence Higgins Trust – It has been very hard to engage with our most vulnerable clients due to the digital divide. We are gathering data on the barriers, to share with the Scottish Government and can share this with NES Digital as well.

Roseann Logan, The ALLIANCE – The Scottish Government's new digital fund is a great resource; however, it is a limited fund which means hard decisions need to be made about who to prioritise for the support.

Response – implementing digital technology has the propensity to widen inequalities and we need to ensure that tackling this is designed in from the very beginning.

Jane Ferguson, Edinburgh and Lothians Health Foundation (ELHF) – are looking at how to support patients in wards in hospitals, with tablets and digital technology. Are also getting requests from NHS staff for devices that they can use to hold calls and other digital services. Have set up a fund to provide this support and are working with Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership and NHS Lothian to identify vulnerable groups and how the most impact can be made.

Response – It is a really great example of how to find digital solutions with an equalities focus.

Allie Cherry-Byrnes, Fast Forward – Have pivoted from face-to-face support for young people to online sessions and are finding it hard to identify which digital platforms are permitted to be used in schools and which platforms are most useful to use.

Response – it is interesting to see how quickly different platforms have been set up with a range of functionality and this is constantly being developed and improved. The nature of digital technology is such that you have to constantly assess which platform is best to use.

Mario Medina, NHS 24 - NHS 24 wants to continue discussions about how we can effectively use and develop digital solutions. We have developed lots of different digital platforms such as chatbots and online resources. We now need to retrospectively assess how accessible these are and are looking to engage with the third sector and service users – so please get in touch if you would like to be involved in this process: [mario.medina@nhs24.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:mario.medina@nhs24.scot.nhs.uk)

Jane Ferguson, ELHF – how do you offer assurance to patients through digital services? It is difficult to make patients feel cared for through digital technology.

Response – We understand that care and assurance hasn't been mirrored in digital technology and this is something we need to design into the services and products we develop.

### **Closing remarks and next steps**

Blythe Robertson – This has been a great opportunity to collectively understand what the barriers and opportunities are to developing accessible and inclusive digital technology. Need to continue the conversation to ensure responsiveness to the needs of all services users is designed into digital technology from the outset.

Claire Stevens – VHS is committed to working with NES Digital to ensure health inequalities are mitigated and not exacerbated by the development of digital health, and we look forward to further engagement with them and with the voluntary health sector to that end.

**For more information please contact Kiren Zubairi, Policy Engagement Officer:  
[Kiren.Zubairi@vhscotland.org.uk](mailto:Kiren.Zubairi@vhscotland.org.uk)**



Mansfield Traquair Centre, 15 Mansfield Place, Edinburgh EH3 6BB  
0131 474 6189 [mail@vhscotland.org.uk](mailto:mail@vhscotland.org.uk) [www.vhscotland.org.uk](http://www.vhscotland.org.uk) @VHSComms

Registered Scottish Charity SC035482. A company limited by guarantee SC267315