

# Digital Strategy, HSC Northern Ireland, 2022- 2030

Response from the Commissioner for Older People for  
Northern Ireland

October  
2022

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13 October 2022

**Re: Digital Strategy, HSC Northern Ireland, 2022-2030**

Dear Dawn

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Department of Health and Social Care's (DHCNI) consultation on the new Digital Strategy for Northern Ireland 2022-2030.

Having reviewed the draft strategy, I firstly would like to acknowledge the potential benefits the strategy could have for improving health and social care services in NI. I agree with the strategic outcomes and the need for having a more streamlined and interconnected approach to health & social care provision and recognise that these developments will go some way to help deliver improved care for our population. This is very much needed and welcome.

The case study examples cited in the document provide a useful insight into the benefits an improved digital system can have for many people. COPNI, does however, recognise that not all older people may experience these benefits and it is therefore important that COPNI highlights some of the concerns it has in relation to the implementation of the strategy and the potential impact this may have for older persons. Our concerns are noted as follows:

**1. Digital Exclusion and Older Persons** –There are many groups in society who remain excluded from important aspects of daily life, because either through choice, location, or personal circumstances they do not have access to the internet.

According to the most recent data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2020 174,000 people in NI had never used the internet. This equates to just over 9% of the NI population<sup>1,2</sup>. Statistics from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) for 2019 / 2020, also show that 13% of households had no internet access at home.

UK wide statistics highlight the percentage rate of older persons (*with a disability, as defined by the Equality Act*) who have never used the internet as follows:

- 55-64: 7%
- 65-74: 16.3%
- 75+: 44.6 %

Furthermore, UK wide figures in 2020 highlight the percentage rate of older users (*including those without disabilities*) who never have not used the internet as follows:

- 55-64: 9.6%
- 65-74: 25 %
- 75+: 76 %

It is therefore important, given the statistics outlined, that consideration is given by the Department to the retention of non-digital services for those users who are not digitally engaged. This is needed to ensure that health care provision remains accessible for older and disabled persons who are digitally excluded. I recognise that the proposed Patient Portal does have the potential to help deliver improved services, however, there may be issues with accessibility, consent, and data protection. The ability of carers and family members to access services on behalf of an older person also needs acknowledged.

**2.Telephone Triage & Video Consultation:** UK studies examining the adequacy of telephone and virtual appointments have found that whilst the system had advantages for some users, there were also a number of areas requiring consideration. Once such user experience study by Healthwatch Brighton and Hove<sup>3</sup> identified a number of issues with these services, some of these are summarised below:

- People who were deaf or had a hearing impairment faced additional difficulties, making some remote appointments difficult to comprehend. Some reported putting off appointments as a result.
- Some users experienced technological challenges, especially for video appointments and for those with a cognitive impairment or other disability.
- The time it took for an initial phone call when the need for a face-to-face appointment was obvious was highlighted as an issue.
- Some older people had difficulties explaining their conditions over the phone or did not have the skills or technology to upload photos or have video calls. Some older people delayed or put off care as a result.

Additionally, COPNI has received a number of complaints in the last year from older persons who have had difficulty in either getting a face-to-face appointment or being able speak directly to a GP.

In conclusion, whilst COPNI supports the strategy and its broader aims there is concern that a reduction in the availability of face-to-face services or increased difficulties for users to speak directly to healthcare providers may impact on health outcomes and users' ability to get the treatment and care they need. There is a distinct need to ensure that there are alternative service

options for service users who are digitally excluded. COPNI requests that full consideration is given to these issues in the development of this strategy.

If you wish to discuss this response, please contact our main number on 02890 890 892.

Yours sincerely

**Clare Mullen**  
**Head of Policy**  
**Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland**

**References:**

1. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/datasets/internetusers>
2. <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/population/mid-year-population-estimates>
3. <https://www.healthwatchbrightonandhove.co.uk/sites/healthwatchbrightonandhove.co.uk/files/People%27s%20views%20about%20remote%20consultations%20-%20compilation%20of%20evidence.pdf>