

ADULTS AND HEALTH SELECT COMMITTEE

THURSDAY 6th MARCH 2025**Supporting General Practice Access Through the Adoption of Automation Capabilities****Purpose of report:**

- 1.1 General practice continues to evolve in response to increasing patient demand, workforce shortages, and the need for more efficient care pathways. Automation tools, such as Rapid Health Smart Triage, are being introduced to help practices manage demand, improve access, and ensure patients are directed to the right care at the right time.
- 1.2 This report sets out:
- The challenges general practice faces and the need for change
 - Why practices have moved from eConsult to Rapid Health Smart Triage to support their access transformation
 - How automation to support access is being adopted and embedded in Surrey Heath and Farnham practices
 - Early experiences from Surrey Heath and Farnham, including successes and areas for ongoing improvement.

Automation is an enabler in the transformation to establish more sustainable general practice models. Its role is to reduce unnecessary manual processes, improve triage, and ensure patients receive care in the most appropriate setting while preserving personal interactions where needed.

Executive Summary:

- 2.1 General practice is under growing pressure due to increasing patient demand, workforce shortages, and inefficiencies in current models of care.
- 2.2 To improve patient access, free up clinical capacity, and reduce administrative burdens, practices in Surrey Heath and Farnham have begun adopting automated workflow tools, such as Rapid Health Smart Triage, as part of a broader transformation.
- 2.3 This change is about enabling a smarter and more efficient way of managing patient demand that better aligns the capacity available to the needs of their patients. When used correctly, automation helps practices:
- Create capacity for healthcare professionals to focus on patients with urgent, complex or long-term needs and maintain continuity where most needed.
 - Reduce manual administrative tasks, freeing up staff time for patient-facing support.

- Improve triage and decision-making, ensuring urgent cases are prioritised and routine cases are managed appropriately and consistently.
 - Ensure patients are seen by the most appropriate professional first time for their needs, including directing patients to pharmacists, physiotherapists, mental health practitioners, and care navigators where appropriate.
 - Improve patient experience and autonomy, providing clearer triage outcomes, reducing phone congestion, and ensuring faster resolution of patient requests.
- 2.4 This transformation and change process requires careful planning. Automation tools require significant clinical mapping, staff training, engagement with residents and ongoing refinement to ensure they align with practice workflows and patient needs.

Introduction and Local context

3. The Rationale for Change

To meet these challenges, general practice must evolve to manage demand more effectively while ensuring timely and appropriate care. This includes:

- 3.1 **Equity and equality of access:** Providing a consistent experience and triage process for all residents for online, phone, and in-person contact. Encouraging residents who can and are able to do digital requests allows capacity to be released to patients who need support through telephone and in-person channels, ensuring equitable access.
- 3.2 **Supporting Digital Inclusion;** The changes being introduced will support, rather than widen, digital inequalities. Having a consistent access offer across different channels ensures the right access model for patient needs and preferences. Introducing systems that release capacity to the patients that need it most includes freeing up workforce capacity to support patients unable to use digital channels while maintaining consistency in patient journey and experience.
- 3.3 **Need-based care navigation and triage:** Prioritising care based on clinical need and urgency rather than time/order of request. Adopting digital solutions that support this approach overcomes the biases of previous systems, ensuring that those needing same-day care based on clinical urgency receive timely attention.
- 3.4 **Getting the most out of the wider Practice team** Directing patients to the right professional, not just GPs, for their needs maximises the utility of the entire practice team. This approach helps to address patient needs more appropriately and efficiently, create a more resilient workforce, and supports patient education on understanding of the teams' wider skills and roles.
- 3.5 **Releasing administrative capacity to where they can be most valuable to the local population:** Automating routine and manual processes to free up staff to be able to focus on more complex tasks. The importance of automating routine processes is that it releases capacity across the workforce on direct patient care, improving the overall patient experience and making the best use of their expertise.

Without a change in triage and appointment model, these issues will continue to strain capacity, widen health inequalities, and lead to worsening patient experiences.

4. Identifying the right digital and automation capabilities to support their model of access e.g. Rapid Health

4.1 Before discussing the specifics of the Rapid Health solution that Surrey Heath and Farnham practices are adopting, it's important to clarify definitions and difference between Artificial Intelligence (AI) and automation. By implementing automation, such as offered through Rapid Health, practices improve efficiency without replacing clinical judgment.

4.1.1 AI involves machine learning and predictive analytics, where systems learn and make decisions based on vast data sets. Automation, on the other hand, follows predefined rules and workflows, streamlining repetitive tasks without independent decision-making.

4.1.2 Rapid Health is an automated triage and workflow tool. It does not "learn" over time but applies structured clinical logic to streamline patient requests and appointment bookings. Rather, it is based on clinical safety/assurance input in the products development, significant time spent by practice clinical teams to develop the pathways and their outcomes.

4.2 To address these challenges, practices in Surrey Heath and Farnham have moved from their current online consultation and appointment booking solutions to Rapid Health Smart Triage, which offers digital capabilities that best support their models. This decision was driven by the need for a more efficient and effective way to manage patient demand and improve access to care. Rapid Health offers several advantages to support this:

4.2.1 Improved patient experience: Patients receive clearer triage outcomes, reducing phone congestion and ensuring faster resolution of requests.

4.2.2 Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all tool, practices are focusing on solutions that enhance and personalise patient journeys while allowing local flexibility without compromising the consistency offer across the patch. The expected benefits are

- a) Intelligent triage: Rapid Health uses structured clinical logic to prioritise urgent cases and manage routine cases appropriately, ensuring patients are directed to the right care at the right time.
- b) Reduced administrative burden: Automation of routine tasks frees up staff time for patient-facing support and reduces the workload on GPs.
- c) Direct appointment booking: Where clinically appropriate, patients can book appointments directly, reducing delays in access to care.

- d) Better use of the wider practice team: Patients are directed to the most appropriate professional for their needs, reducing unnecessary GP appointments.
- 4.3 Rapid Health is an automated triage and workflow tool. It applies pre-defined and structured clinical logic to identify the urgency of a patients' request. This enables the system to streamline patient requests and offer the patient an appointment within a timeframe that is both clinically safe and appropriate.
- 4.3.1 The clinical protocols and pathways that the system follows underpin this process. They have been scrutinised and validated to ensure that only an appointment within a safe timeframe is offered.
 - 4.3.2 Furthermore, each individual practice has spent considerable time reviewing pathways and mapping the possible outcomes to an appointment type, which due to staffing may vary a little across different practices. The purpose of this is to ensure that patients see a healthcare professional who has the right skills to help with their presenting problem and needs.
 - 4.3.3 It is important to recognise that Rapid Health is not Artificial Intelligence or machine learning. It is automation of a sophisticated decision-making process. Rapid Health takes the answers provided by a patient using the request form to follow the clinical pathway, leading to an appropriate outcome.
 - 4.3.4 As with any tool or process in healthcare, there is constant feedback from practices. This informs development of new pathways and minor adjustments to optimise existing pathways and question sets. Rapid Health has a robust quality and safety record and deemed as being a medical device, meeting clinical safety criteria for use in the NHS.
 - 4.3.5 In Frimley ICS, we have established collaborative working groups where practices can share concerns or issues, and we are starting to work with colleagues in other ICBs to help collate feedback and escalate any development requests directly to Rapid Health.
5. The primary goal of automation is not to replace human decision-making but to enable better allocation of resources. When implemented correctly, it provides several key benefits:
- 5.1 **For Patients:** More timely access to the right care. - Automated triage ensures that urgent cases are prioritised while routine queries are directed to the appropriate service.
 - 5.2 Greater clarity on next steps - Patients receive immediate and clear triage outcomes, which offers great reassurance and awareness. They know what to expect and what the next steps are in their care journey.

- 5.3 Improved access and convenience: Where clinically appropriate, patients can book appointments directly through the system, reducing delays and making the process more convenient.
 - 5.4 More digital options for those who prefer them - Patients who prefer online interactions can engage more conveniently, while those needing alternative access routes still have equitable access and support.
 - 5.5 Reduced demand on alternative routes in such as telephone congestion: By managing demand more effectively, Rapid Health reduces phone congestion, making it easier for patients to get through to the practice when they need to.
- 6. For Practices:** Reduced administrative workload - Reception teams spend less time manually processing online requests, freeing up capacity for patient-facing support.
- 6.1 Better use of workforce capacity - By automating routine administrative tasks, Rapid Health frees up clinical staff to focus on patient-facing activities and more complex cases. This improves the overall efficiency of the practice and allows healthcare professionals to spend more time with patients who need it most.
 - 6.2 More structured clinical information - The system collects key patient details upfront, providing clinicians with more structured and relevant information before consultations. This leads to more informed and efficient interactions for the patient.
- 7. For the NHS and Wider System:** Supports sustainability of general practice - By managing workload more effectively, practices can operate in a more sustainable and resilient way.
- 7.1 Reduces unnecessary GP appointments - Ensures that patients are directed to alternative services where appropriate, reducing pressure on general practice.
 - 7.2 Improves data-driven decision-making - Practices can use automation insights to plan workforce allocation and future service delivery.

<p>Implementation Including Approach to Patient Engagement</p>

- 8. Automation is introduced in general practice to improve efficiency and manage demand, but it is essential that it does not replace the trust and relationships between patients and their healthcare providers. Practices have adopted several strategies and design principles to ensure that automation supports, rather than diminishes, the patient experience.
 - 8.1 One of the key benefits of automation is that it reduces administrative burdens on clinicians and practice staff, allowing them to spend more time with their patients.
 - 8.2 By automating routine tasks such as triage, appointment booking, and administrative queries, GPs and staff have more availability for direct patient

interaction both in terms of increased numbers of appointments and reducing waiting times for pre-bookable appointments where it's appropriate for the need and issue.

- 8.3 This means that clinicians can spend longer with patients who have urgent presenting issues, complex or ongoing health needs instead of being overwhelmed by high patient volumes.
 - 8.4 Automation ensures that the right patients are seen by the right professional, improving the quality and outcomes of each patient interaction rather than simply increasing the number of appointments.
 - 8.5 By improving the efficiency of background processes, practices can focus on delivering high-quality, patient-centred care rather than being caught up in excessive administrative tasks.
9. While automated triage tools such as Rapid Health provides an additional way for patients to access care, practices continue to offer multiple access and communications channels to ensure equity of access for those patients unable to use digital options. This includes those patients who may not feel as confident in using digital platforms and tools.
 - 9.1 Face-to-face appointments remain available for patients who need them.
 - 9.2 Telephone consultations continue when clinically appropriate for those who prefer this or find it a more convenient to speak on the telephone.
 - 9.3 Reception and care navigation teams are available to assist patients that require some support in building their confidence and understanding of the tools and routes available.
 - 9.4 This approach ensures that automation does not replace human contact but instead enhances access and efficiency, allowing practices to direct more time and attention to those who need it most.
 10. Automated triage systems help ensure that patients receive more personalised, needs based care by directing them to the most appropriate clinician or service for their needs (based on urgency, complexity or background health) and maintaining continuity where needed.
 - 10.1 The system collects structured information about the patient's symptoms and history before an appointment, meaning clinicians have more insight before they even see the patient.
 - 10.2 This allows for more informed, efficient, and focused consultations, as the GP or clinician can get straight to the issue rather than spending time collecting basic background information.

- 10.3 By reducing the number of unnecessary appointments, clinicians have more time for to provide continuity of care for patients with acute, long-term or complex needs.
 - 10.4 Rather than replacing personal relationships, automation helps strengthen them by ensuring that patient interactions are more meaningful and focused.
11. The implementation of Rapid Health has been a structured and collaborative process that supports establishing consistency of processes and patient journeys, as well as building on the learning to reduce risks. Key steps include:
- 11.1 Alignment with the practice's model of care: Ensuring that the tool supports existing clinical pathways rather than disrupting workflows.
 - 11.2 Comprehensive clinical mapping before launch: Ensuring that the triage system aligns with practice-specific needs, with clear escalation pathways for urgent cases.
 - 11.3 Training and engagement for practice teams: Ensuring that all staff understand how the system works and how to use it effectively to manage demand.
 - 11.4 Clear patient communication: Providing guidance on how to use the new system, what to expect, and how it improves access.
 - 11.5 Continuous monitoring and refinement: Using data and feedback to identify improvements and adjust triage rules as needed.
12. To ensure that patients feel well informed, practices have also focused on how they communicate and engage with their patients pre, during and post transition to Rapid Health. It is recognised that the appetite for change will vary for residents based on their preferences and awareness. This includes acknowledging those that are unable to take up the digital channels for reasons such as digital accessibility, confidence or access to a device, and providing reassurance around the support and channels of access still available. This includes:
- 12.1 Recognising variations in appetite for change: Understanding that not all patients will be able or willing to use digital routes and addressing their needs accordingly.
 - 12.2 Communicating the details of the transition and changes through multiple channels of communication to support reach across patients including direct messaging, messaging on practice websites and social media, as well as sharing through Healthwatch Surrey and local council.
 - 12.3 Ongoing support for patient education: Using texts, posters, FAQs, and engaging Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) to address concerns and build confidence in using the new system.
 - 12.4 Maintaining multiple communication channels: Ensuring equity of access for patients unable to use digital options by continuing to offer phone and face-to-face appointments.
 - 12.5 Providing in-person support: Assisting patients who need help submitting requests and ensuring automated systems support accessibility needs, such as language translation and screen reader compatibility.

- 12.6 Engaging with residents: Actively involving the community in the transition process, gathering feedback, and making adjustments based on their input to ensure the system meets their needs.
- 13. With the opportunity that automation provides in improving efficiency, it is crucial to factor in before implementation how patients unable to use the digital access channels will be supported. Practices have been taking the below considerations into planning to reduce/prevent digital exclusion as part of their introduction of Rapid Health to support their access models, including:
 - 13.1 Maintaining equitable and consistency in their offer across access routes including phone and face-to-face access, ensuring patients who cannot use online tools can still access care and have the support to do so.
 - 13.2 Training care navigators and reception staff to assist patients who struggle with digital triage.
 - 13.3 Providing in-person support at the practice for patients who need help submitting requests.
 - 13.4 Ensuring automated systems support accessibility needs, such as language translation and screen reader compatibility.
 - 13.5 Practices are also continuously gathering feedback from patients and community groups to identify any barriers and refine the system accordingly.

Early Insights from Rapid Health Implementation

- 14. The introduction of automation capabilities, such as offered by Rapid Health Smart Triage in Surrey Heath and Farnham has provided valuable early insights into how automation can improve access, reduce administrative burden, and streamline patient triage. While there have been clear positive impacts, there have also been challenges that practices are addressing as they continue embedding the system.
- 15. **Early Positive Impacts:** Early feedback shows that many patients find it easier to book appointments when needed, and the system is enhancing both efficiency and accessibility across practices. Several benefits have already been noted during the initial phase of implementation from workforce and patient feedback, as well as early data.
 - 15.1 Better triage and prioritisation: Urgent cases are reaching the right healthcare professional with the right skillset faster, while routine cases are signposted to appropriate alternatives such as pharmacies, self-care, or other healthcare professionals within primary care.
 - 15.2 More efficient and appropriate appointment booking: Automated scheduling has streamlined the process, reducing manual handling and improving patient experience compared to previous online consultation tools.

- 15.3 Released phone capacity for those that most need to use that channel of access: More patients are using Rapid Health, leading to shorter wait times for those who need to call.
- 15.4 More structured clinical information: Clinicians receive better pre-consultation details, allowing them to prepare more effectively, resulting in more focused and efficient appointments.
- 15.5 Improved administrative workflows: Reception and care navigation teams spend less time on routine bookings and administrative tasks, enabling them to prioritise their capacity for more appropriate patient facing activities.
16. **Early Challenges and Areas for Improvement:** While the initial implementation has shown promise, the practices have been approaching embedding Rapid Health as a continual improvement opportunity and are actively collating and working to address areas of improvement and challenge. Early areas of focus include:
- 16.1 Ongoing support to build patient awareness and confidence: While many patients find the system intuitive, some-especially those less familiar and less confident with digital tools-have struggled with the transition.
- Next steps: Ongoing support for patient education (texts, posters, FAQs), and increasing reception team support. Engaging Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) to address concerns. This will include communicating the routes in that support patients unable to use digital routes in and how practices are maintaining an equitable access offer.
- 16.2 Managing Expectations Around GP Appointments: Some patients expect to see a GP even when another healthcare professional has the appropriate level of experience and skills for their needs and presenting issue. Some feel disappointed when signposted to self-care or alternative services instead of a GP.
- Next steps: Strengthening patient communication on the wider roles and skills in a practice, and the role of triage and care navigation in supporting getting patients seen by the right person at the right time for their needs.
- 16.3 Complex Cases & System Limitations: Not all cases fit neatly into automated pathways, requiring manual intervention.
- Next steps: Collaborating with system providers to refine triage logic and training staff to handle exceptions effectively.
- 16.4 Automation Concerns & Perceptions: Some patients worry that digital triage limits access to in-person care, despite telephone and face-to-face options.
- Next steps: Expanding on existing communication and engagement support to provide assurance of the role of Rapid Health as part of a wider model supports

equitable access and how patient feedback is being used for continuously improving system usability.

Conclusion

17. The introduction of digital automation in general practice is a strategic transformation aimed at ensuring capacity and clinical expertise are aligned with patient needs. Rather than replacing human decision-making, automation supports clinical judgment by providing structured, prioritised information through evidence-based triage pathways that are safe, consistent, and efficient - releasing time back to where most needed.
18. For those practices adopting automation capabilities such as Rapid Health, the primary ambition is to establish a consistent triage approach and capabilities of a tool not to replace human decision-making but to enable better allocation of capacity to patient need without introducing barriers of access. Key priorities going forward include:
 - 18.1 **Continuous Evaluation and Refinement:** Regularly assess and update automation pathways to ensure they remain responsive to both practice and patient needs. This includes incorporating feedback from patients and staff to improve the system's effectiveness and usability.
 - 18.2 **Proactive Patient Engagement and Education:** Maintain ongoing communication with patients to build their understanding and confidence in using digital triage systems. This can be achieved through educational materials, community engagement, support from reception and care navigator staff, and sharing back patient experience stories.
 - 18.3 **Improvement of Clinical Pathways:** Continuously refine clinical pathways and mapping to ensure automation aligns with the operational models of different practices. This helps maintain the quality and safety of patient care.
 - 18.4 **Supporting Digital Inclusion:** Provide a consistent offer across all contact channels into the practice, ensuring that patients who cannot use digital tools still have access to care. This includes offering phone and face-to-face options and providing assistance to those who need help navigating automated systems.
 - 18.5 **Expanding Collaboration with Multi-Disciplinary Teams:** Work closely with pharmacists, physiotherapists, mental health specialists, and other healthcare professionals to ensure that automation effectively routes patients to the most appropriate care
19. By embedding automation in a way that complements clinical decision-making and patient relationships, general practice can create a more sustainable, resilient, and accessible healthcare model for the future. The structured and thoughtful approach outlined in this report ensures that automation delivers meaningful improvements in patient care, workforce sustainability, and practice efficiency.

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