

HEALTHWATCH KENT SPOTLIGHT SERIES: GP eConsult services



November 2021

Many of you have been in touch to share your experience of using the GP eConsult service. You told us about the challenges you are facing to use the service including:

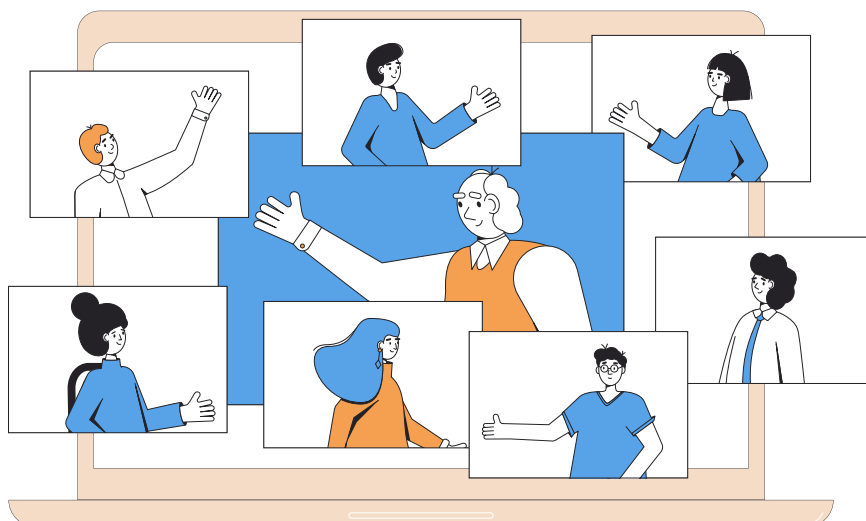
- Difficulties using the digital eConsult platform
- Concern about how people who are not online will access their GP
- Confusion about what to expect once the eConsult form has been submitted
- Despite being informed by eConsult that a GP would contact them, this call sometimes didn't happen or took several days to occur
- Confusion about what eConsult should be offering patient and how it works

Raising your voice

We shared your feedback directly with GPs and their Practice Managers, plus the Clinical Commissioning Group (who commission GP services in Kent) and asked for their thoughts.

They recognised that they need to explain to people what the eConsult service can offer and how it works. By being clearer, they hope that people will know what the service can, and can't, offer and hopefully lead to less confusion and disappointment.

Thank you for taking the time to share your concerns and questions with us. By sharing these and the direct responses, we hope that it may help other people in a similar situation to you.



The feedback we heard at Healthwatch Kent

"eConsult only works if your condition falls inside the boxes, the drop-down boxes don't cover all scenarios and people's conditions rarely fit into boxes "

"I'm aware of a GP surgery that no longer takes phone calls, people who are just directed to e consult. This is OK for people who are computer literate. Also, eConsult can be difficult to find on the GP website. "

"It seems that the receptionists in GP's are using their judgement as to what action comes after an eConsult, it does not seem to be a clinical based decision. "

"Patients completing eConsults may be worried about grammar or spelling and for confidential queries people may be less likely to fully disclose an issue when they know the record is going to be retained on a computer. "

"One patient completed an eConsult form on a Thursday evening receiving an email saying they would be in touch the following evening. They received another email advising that the GP would be in touch by the following Wednesday, a delay of 6 days. On the following Wednesday no call from GP received, they filled in another eConsult, stating the aggravation this was causing. Within 48 hours, they had a call from a member of the team stating there was no need for the patient to worry, as their results are fine. This was considered a sufficient response to the client's concern regarding some test results they had. They really want to raise concerns that the system is not fit for purpose and that delays are causing high levels of worry for people."

"Patients think eConsult is another way of booking an appointment, or that a virtual doctor will be there to talk to them. That is not what eConsult is designed for. People feel let down when the service doesn't provide them with an appointment for the next day."



Guidance from Kent and Medway CCG

What is eConsult?

Econsult is an online service which allows patients to contact their GP practice and give an overview of their symptoms or concerns. This online form is submitted to the practice where it is reviewed, and the clinician chooses the best next steps for you. This might not mean a GP appointment, but you will be contacted within a specified time to let you know what happens next.

The eConsult service is not intended for urgent or emergency requests. If a patient triggers a red-flag question they are shown an immediate message to take the relevant action.

Using e-consult starts a similar process to calling the practice. You are registering a health concern or issue for the practice to determine the best way to respond.

Although the process of reviewing econsultations varies between practices, whoever reviews them will have been trained to do so and will not make clinical decisions if they are not a clinician. It is similar to speaking with a patient co-ordinator at reception of a practice. Old-fashioned 'receptionists' are a thing of the past and the people manning modern GP practices are trained to make sure that people can get to the right help as quickly as possible.

How does it help patients?

The ability to fill out a consultation form online means you can avoid long phone queues and sometimes submit a form out of hours, at a time to suit you, knowing that you will be contacted by the relevant person.

As General Practice continues to manage significantly increased demand, eConsult also helps reduce phone calls, meaning that lines are left clearer for those who do not have internet access or cannot use an eConsult.

Not all appointments need to be with a GP. Practices now have access to a wide range of professionals, from advanced nurse practitioners and paramedics to social prescribers and physiotherapists. It may be more suitable for you to see one of these roles and your eConsult form will help the person reviewing it determine who is best to see you.



How do I submit an eConsult?

There should be a clear link on your GP website to take you to an eConsult form. Your GP practice website should confirm if eConsult is available and how quickly you can expect a response. Sometimes, over bank holidays or particular busy times, some practices may stop their eConsult for a while or shut it off if they are not there to manage it. This helps practices manage the flow of patients.

Is it confidential?

Everything read on an eConsult form is confidential, as is anything said on a phone call to your practice. Similarly, no-one is concerned about spelling or grammar, as long as you can be understood.

When I've tried to use it, I can't see my concern on the drop down list?

There is also a 'general advice' option with a text box so that you can write about what is specific to you.

What happens if I have an issue I want to raise about econsult?

Each practice uses eConsult in a way to suit them and their patients and may differ from others. If you have a problem or wish to raise an issue, contact your GP practice directly who should be able to help.

The CCG have shared the following data on the use of eConsult across Kent and Medway.

In November 2021

74,041 eConsultations were sent by patients to their GP Practice

62% were satisfied with their eConsult

63% would recommend eConsult to a friend

76% were contacted within the timescale

Keep telling us your stories

Don't stop talking to us. We can make sure decision makers here about your experience of health and social care services here in Kent.

We continue to share feedback from people who are struggling to get an appointment with their GP and know that this can be really frustrating when you, or a loved one, are in need of some help. We are here to listen to you and support you through our free Information & Signposting service. For example, we can make sure you know how to make a complaint about your GP experience or let you know about a support group that could help you while you wait for a GP appointment.

Get in touch and tell us your story. If we don't know your story, then we can't start trying to make it better.

If you would like to share your story with us, we would love to hear from you.

You can reach us through the following routes:



Online:
www.healthwatchkent.co.uk



By Telephone:
Healthwatch Kent Freephone
0808 801 01 02



By Email:
Info@healthwatchkent.co.uk



By Text:
Text us on 07525 861 639. By
texting 'NEED BSL', Healthwatch's
British Sign Language interpreter
will make contact and arrange a
time to meet face to face