

Using NHS Near Me to provide health services to people experiencing homelessness

NHS Lothian, Edinburgh Access Practice

“For very little cost we can create a high health & wellbeing gain opportunity for a large number of our most vulnerable citizens”



Doneil Macleod, Practice Mental Health Nurse, Edinburgh Access Practice

What was the emerging need?

People experiencing homelessness already face many barriers to accessing health services. The change in the way services are being delivered during the pandemic has the potential to increase health inequalities experienced by marginalised groups in the community.

With the restrictions on face-to-face contact and the requirements for social distancing brought about by COVID-19, access to services for people with complex and multiple needs became more difficult and in many cases the services were no longer available. In order to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 and to support people experiencing homelessness to have their health needs met, a new way of delivering services was required to ensure people can access the help they require in a way that protects staff as well as patients.

Staff at Edinburgh Access Practice identified the use of NHS Near Me video consulting facilities as a potential way to provide services that had not been possible to deliver during the pandemic. However, many people experiencing homelessness do not have access to a device which would enable them to use Near Me to access the service. The practice recognised the need for kit and support and successfully sought funding to buy laptops for people experiencing homelessness to use which were distributed across homelessness accommodation sites in the city.

Background to the response

Edinburgh Access Practice

The Edinburgh Access Practice provides a range of health services to people experiencing homelessness including GP surgeries, mental health, addictions and midwifery. Traditionally, services have been delivered via outreach services or face to face consultations at any of the two practice facilities in the city. The practice is committed to addressing health inequality and helping to improve the health and wellbeing of the city's most vulnerable citizens.

NHS Near Me

NHS Near Me is a video consulting service that enables people to have health and social care appointments from their place of residence or wherever is convenient. Video consultations are carried out using an internet connection and a smartphone or device.



Insights into how health and wellbeing needs are being met in an equitable way during COVID-19



How are things different?

The practice purchased five reconditioned laptops using funding from the NHS Lothian COVID-19 Emergency Fund and Edinburgh Lothian Health Foundation (EHLF). The aim in developing video consultations was to enable those from marginalised communities to have access to healthcare and replace, as far as clinically safe and possible, face-to-face consultations in order to protect staff as well as patients.

Using existing trusted relationships with homelessness organisations, including the Bethany Trust and the Simon Community Streetwork team, the laptops were then distributed and installed in homelessness accommodation sites across the city.

In consultation with the accommodation sites a virtual clinic timetable was created to provide a dedicated time for patients in the various accommodation sites to access the service. In order to support people to use the service, the practice also produced detailed user instructions and a patient leaflet.

Using Near Me, the team is now carrying out virtual video consultations to enable a reduction in footfall to the practice and reduce face-to-face contacts during COVID-19 restrictions.

These video conversations have, for example, resulted in collaborative decision making around:

- accommodation issues
- prescribing
- safer management of mental health distress, and
- mitigation of physical ill health.

Where other services are required during individual consultations such as pharmacy or addictions services, staff are able to invite clinicians to join the call via text message. This allows for patients' wider needs to be addressed using a more coordinated approach.

Key insights: Doneil Macleod, Edinburgh Access Practice

Increased access to health services

“Using this model in all venues with instructions for use and basic training for staff, we could offer a virtual clinical consulting service to all accommodation providers in homelessness services. For very little cost we can create a high health and wellbeing gain opportunity for a large number of our most vulnerable citizens.”

Provides a person-centred approach to care

“There’s a dignity in it that I hadn’t accounted for or expected in some ways. It’s allowing a specific time to be put aside for an individual, the staff put aside the space and look after the laptop, there’s a lot of little kindnesses that happen around the service.”

Opportunity to undertake a multi-disciplinary approach to addressing people’s needs

“I’m bringing other clinicians onto the calls, like pharmacists for instance. It’s about letting the patient know that you’re not just important to me, you’re important to a lot of services and I’m trying to make connections with them for you.”

Building relationships

“By using this digital platform as a relationship tool we have been able to maintain a focus on care during COVID-19 restrictions, a hugely important intervention for people already heavily disenfranchised even without the restrictions.”

If you are interested in exploring something similar in your area or to find out more, please get in touch.

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