NHS England

08 | **A bite size guide to:**

Online Participation

Getting started

NHS England is committed to ensuring that public and patient voices are at the centre of shaping our healthcare services. Every level of our commissioning system needs to be informed by insightful methods of listening to those who use and care about our services. We need to ensure we do more than listen to our citizens. Their views should inform service development. Public and patient voice will be embedded into our commissioning processes in a range of ways.

This bite size guide explains the benefits and principals of engaging with patients and the public using online channels, and suggests some practical steps commissioners can take to use these channels to support their strategic objectives.

Why?

The growth in popularity of tablets, smart devices and social media platforms mean that the sharing of information online is now integrated into virtually every aspect of daily life. When used as part of a wider digital strategy, these platforms have the potential to spread key messages faster and more efficiently than ever before, whilst promoting and supporting key organisational objectives. The Department of Health also recognise this potential, as referenced in their revised Digital Strategy:

'Sharing experiences through social channels equips people with information to help them to get the right support or care. This step change means everyone will benefit from more joined-up care, better services, and more transparent sharing of information. Patients and the public will access information or services in ways designed for them, not for the system. And health and care professionals will spend more time caring for the people most in need, and less time serving inefficient information systems.'

('Digital Strategy' - Department of Health, 2012)

What is online participation?

The need to engage with a wide and varied audience means that participation can come in many forms. This can range from a simple website enquiry or Retweet, to the completion of an online survey, as part of a wider consultation process (see Want to learn more? section). It is important to note that participation in the online sense, and by definition engagement, is about more than just communicating or sharing a message. It should involve some sort of meaningful interaction with the end user.

What does digital engagement activity look like?

A basic digital engagement strategy might utilise the following components:

Web – a public-facing website is an ideal place to highlight your key engagement activities and news updates, including a "Key contacts" section for people to make contact directly.

Online surveys – offer online surveys developed using software purchased by your organisation or a provider such as Survey Monkey. Embed them into your website and share via other channels such as Twitter and Facebook.

Social media – use commonly used sites such as Facebook and Twitter to share information online and encourage responses or feedback. You can use these platforms to share content from other digital channels by creating links. Use these to engage with your followers and ask questions on key topics.

Blogs – set up a blog as part of your existing website, using an informal editorial style, Blogs can be a good way of presenting content in an accessible way and can be shared via links to other channels.

Metrics – understand the overall impact and reach of your communications.

Core principles

The use of individual digital platforms should be considered as part of a wider digital strategy. Digital Platforms are rarely as effective, used in isolation, as when part of an integrated, considered approach.
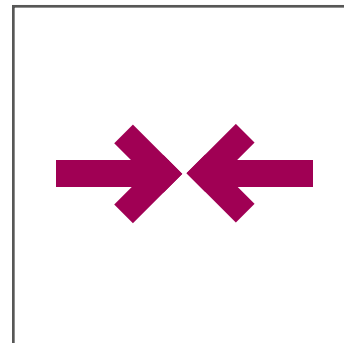
Integrated digital campaigns employ a mix of channels to convey a message and stimulate conversation.

Online participation allows commissioners to reach more isolated areas of the community, such as those with mobility issues who may not be able to reach events.
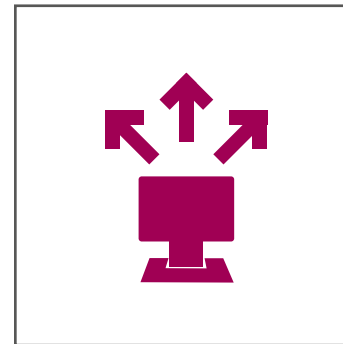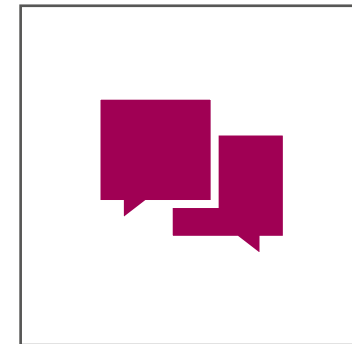
Core principles

In addition to wide reach, social media offers an exceptionally valuable and low cost approach to engagement methods.

Intelligent use of web and social platforms allows for the communication of vital information in real-time.

Online discussion affords those who might not usually participate a safe, secure and sometimes anonymous environment in which to interact.

Core principles
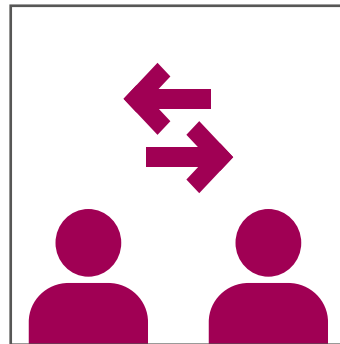
The digital sharing of opportunities and information, by cascading through partner organisations, can spread the message further and wider.

Analysis of data (web page visits, social media interaction etc.) helps individuals to understand how and when users are interacting, and which content is of interest to them.

Kate Granger is a doctor and founder of the hugely popular #hellomynameis campaign. She is also a terminally ill cancer patient. During a hospital stay last summer she observed that many staff responsible for her care failed to introduce themselves. The campaign is designed to encourage and remind healthcare staff about the importance of introductions in the delivery of care. She currently has over 34,000 followers on Twitter and her messages have reached a global audience.

Practical Steps

1. **Create a digital strategy for the engagement that you want to deliver – audit your existing channels and identify which new channels will compliment them.** For each of those channels identify key objectives, actions and metrics. Consider how these channels will support your traditional engagement methodologies. Use a mix of participation techniques, including both digital and face to face. Also consider how these channels could support other engagement activity, for example, promoting events through digital routes, put surveys up on a website to encourage more responses, or tweet in real time from an event so that people can virtually join in.

2. **Understand your audience – who are you trying to reach?** Different platforms are sometimes suited to different audiences. For example, a consultation around the emotional health and wellbeing of young people might rely more heavily on social media than other channels.

3. **Get your web team involved and identify internal 'champions' who will monitor and contribute to your social output.**

Practical Steps

4. Create an internal social media policy that clearly defines areas of responsibility.

5. Encourage members of the board or senior management to actively contribute to your digital output. A blog, for example, provides a creative platform to ask questions and promote thought leadership. It also provides a 'friendly face' through which your audience are more likely to interact.

6. Consider a single point of access and digital repository for all of your survey and consultation activities.

7. Evaluate your online approaches – gather metrics on the digital channels that you use (e.g. number of web views, number of survey downloads and returns, and a number of programmes can help with analysing digital reach). Consider using an all-in-one social media monitoring tool such as Hootsuite (free, with limited users) to manage your social feeds, and register for a Google Analytics account (free).

8. Social and web are now considered legitimate channels through which to submit complaints or Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. Ensure your organisational policy maps out this process.

Practical Steps

NHS Citizen is a project that aims to answer a simple question: what is the best way for NHS England to take into account the views of the public when it makes decisions? The team engages with a wide audience on a variety of topics. The project's wider digital strategy also incorporates webcasts, microsites and video.

Want to Learn More?

Digital by Default Service Standard: https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/digital-by-default

NHS Employers guidance for managers on social media. http://www.nhsemployers.org/your-workforce/need-to-know/social-media-and-the-nhs/a-social-media-toolkit-for-the-nhs

Getting started with Twitter https://support.twitter.com/articles/215585-getting-started-with-twitter

NHS England blog page https://www.england.nhs.uk/category/publications/blogs/

NHS England Consultation Hub: Citizen Space https://www.engage.england.nhs.uk/

Need help?
Contact the Patient and Public Voice team at england.nhs.participation@nhs.net

Other Bite-Size Guides

Click on the links below to download each of our 'bite-size guides' to participation. Additional guides are in development.

Bite-size guide 1 – Principles for Participation in Commissioning

Bite-size guide 2 – Governance for Participation

Bite-size guide 3 – Planning for Participation

Bite-size guide 4 – Budgeting for Participation

Guides 5 -15 are also available via the following link:
https://www.england.nhs.uk/participation/resources/

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This is an interactive PDF: To navigate, use the arrow buttons at the bottom or the main menu on the left side of the page.

NHS England's series of 'Bite-size guides' aims to help colleagues plan and deliver the best possible patient and public participation, in line with Transforming Participation in Health and Care.

For further information, please contact england.nhs.participation@nhs.net
Produced by the Patient and Public Voice team at NHS England.