Realising the benefits

The NHS e-Referral Service (e-RS) handles over 68,000 referrals every day and has transformed the process of referral between primary and secondary care for patients and clinicians; its use results in a better patient experience, allowing patients to book an appointment at a location, date and time that is convenient to them. The booking is immediate, speeding up the time it takes to be treated and reducing the number of appointments where the patient fails to attend (DNAs).

For professional users e-RS improves the efficiency of the referral management process by reducing the time taken to create and manage referrals, improving the accuracy of recorded clock starts by automatically populating a pathway start date in trusts’ computer systems and facilitating improved communication between primary and secondary care. Referral quality is improved, and the number of inappropriate referrals is reduced, ensuring patients are seen by the right person in the right place first time.

Benefits for referrers

- Referrers have access to a complete directory of secondary care services available to support patient choice as well as services locally commissioned by CCGs, reducing the time taken to identify appropriate services.
- Once referred, patients can be directed to book their own appointment on-line using Manage Your Referral or by using the Telephone Appointment Line, reducing the administrative burden on referrers.
- E-RS is flexible allowing the referral process to be adapted to suit different working conditions in referring practices.
- Referrers can identify those services with the shortest waiting times ensuring their patients are seen as soon as possible.
- Access to service specific guidance helps referrers select the most appropriate services for their patient and reduces the number of referrals that are rejected by the provider.
- Referrers can seek specialist advice and guidance prior to referral, improving communication with secondary care colleagues and ensuring that patient care is managed in the most appropriate setting.
- Referrers can track the progress of a patient’s referral through e-RS reducing the amount of time spent managing patient queries related to referrals.

Benefits for providers

- Referrals can be managed electronically, reducing the time taken to process an average referral by 75% (from 8 minutes for a paper referral to 2 minutes for an e-RS referral).
- The quality of referrals is improved through the ability to provide referrers with service specific criteria such as exclusions and required diagnostic tests via the Directory of Services.
- The number of inappropriate referrals is reduced by using e-RS to provide specialist advice and guidance to referrers,
  - In 2015 Calderdale and Huddersfield received 2384 Advice and Guidance (A&G) requests to a range of specialties. A review of these requests found:
    - Only 1 in 4 patients were advised to refer immediately for an outpatient appointment
    - More than half of all patients (57%) were provided with advice only and thus did not require an outpatient appointment (the full case study can be found here)
• A&G improves the integration and communication between primary and secondary care
• The number of appointments not attended (DNAd) is reduced, by, on average, 50% as a result of patients having choice of appointment location, date and time (from 10% for non-e-RS referrals to 5% for e-RS referrals)

In 2014, the National Audit Office (NAO) used information from 91 Provider completed Outpatient Pathway Modelling Tool (OPMT) returns to calculate the total savings that could be realised by secondary care providers using e-RS:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Savings (£m per year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difference between current processing costs and cost of processing all referrals through e-RS ‘best practice’</td>
<td>£19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savings from reducing the number of patients failing to attend appointments</td>
<td>£27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savings from ensuring all appointments are available to be booked via e-RS</td>
<td>£2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savings from patients rebooking their own appointments instead of trusts</td>
<td>£0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>£50.5</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figures above were published by the NAO in their report “NHS waiting times for elective care in England”, and were the subject of debate in a Parliamentary Accounts Committee hearing involving the Department of Health’s Permanent Secretary Una O’Brien and NHS England Chief Executive Sir David Nicholson.

**Benefits for patients**

• Increased provision of services convenient to patients, patients can book an appointment at a location, date and time that is convenient to them.
• Reduction in the time taken to receive an appointment,
  o A review by University Hospitals Morecambe Bay found that patients received an appointment date, on average, eight days faster when referrals were made via e-RS.
• Reduced anxiety about the referral process, as a result of having a confirmed, booked appointment.
  The 2017 e-RS patient survey results indicated that:
  o 76% of patients were more likely to end up going to their preferred provider
  o 66% know sooner when their appointment will be
  o 55% knew within 2 weeks when their appointment would be
• Improved access to manage appointments, e-RS provides 24/7 access to book, re-book and cancel appointments on-line using Manage Your Referral.
• Reduction in the number of inappropriate appointments. Advice & Guidance allows a referrer to seek specialist opinion that can result in fewer patients needing to be referred for an appointment at hospital.