


Reforming for Recovery:

Improving connection
in primary care



4:27



Dr Hellowell
07794454102

A white rectangular card with rounded corners. At the top right, there is a red pill-shaped icon containing the time '4:27'. Below this is a circular profile picture of a woman with glasses and dark hair, set against a yellow background. Underneath the profile picture, the name 'Dr Hellowell' is written in bold black text, followed by the phone number '07794454102' in a smaller black font.

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Introduction



The NHS is under pressure as never before. The demands of a growing and rapidly changing population have expanded far beyond what was imagined when the service was first established, more than three quarters of a century ago.



For most citizens, primary care acts as the gateway to provision, the first stage in a healthcare journey. As such, primary care organisations and staff represent the front line in meeting the health needs of an ever-expanding populace.

Primary care organisations were among the first to feel the effects of the pandemic. Their response was swift and effective. Immediately adapting to the situation, new ways of working were trialled, new processes put in place and technological innovations implemented. However, they have emerged from the pandemic only to face new difficulties. Somewhat inevitably, backlogs have built throughout the system which, added to well-understood staffing problems and persistently challenging economic conditions, have created what amounts to an existential crisis for the NHS at the time of its 75th anniversary.

For primary care providers, the situation is clear. Barely a week passes without a negative headline story about the NHS. If the unique NHS model is to continue in its present form, change has become essential. Throughout the service, leaders understand the critical need to find new and innovative solutions.



The pandemic showed that digitalisation, underpinned by the latest in communications technology, can provide answers to seemingly intractable problems. Much has already been achieved, but it is now vital to build upon this progress. This white paper will explore ways in which greater advances can be made. Expanding on the results of a recent [survey](#) conducted by GovNews, in partnership with RingCentral, it provides insight into how the latest developments in communications technology are enabling organisations to power forwards, helping them redefine an NHS that can look to the future with confidence.

An effective response to crisis



When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the impact on primary care was immediate. In its initial stages, citizens heeded the advice of governments and administrations throughout the UK, as rules over social distancing took effect and resources were quickly redeployed to meet expected needs. Statistics compiled from NHS Digital research¹ showed that the number of face-to-face appointments fell by 7.5 million during the early months of the first wave – a reduction of nearly 50%. Over the same period, telephone and online consultation rose from 15% to 48%, as practices began to make use of technologies such as telecare, virtual surgeries and digital triaging.

"The rapid development and rollout of technology-based solutions to support remote care during the pandemic helped all of us to realise the rapid opportunities this presents."²

- Dr Claire Fuller, CEO (designate) Surrey Heartlands ICS

As more information became available, the response necessarily evolved and patients gradually returned to seeking non-emergency care. Naturally, backlogs started to build, as citizens who had been unable to obtain treatment began to come back, sometimes with symptoms that had worsened due to delay. There was a further surge in demand for primary care services following the advent of the first vaccines, with GPs and surgeries taking on a vital role in delivering doses at community level.

The subsequent growth in demand



"An average sized practice of 10,000 patients often receives more than 100 calls in the first hour every Monday."³

However, as the pandemic recedes into the national memory, any notion that demand for primary care might be experiencing a reduction would be incorrect. In fact, the opposite is true. Demand for services is growing at a rate that is causing concern in all four nations.

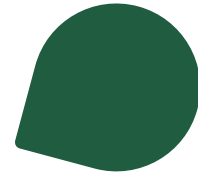
According to data from BMA Cymru Wales⁴, more than 80% of GPs fear excessive workloads and rising demand are impacting their ability to provide quality care. In Scotland, 8 in 10 GP practices⁵ have reported that demand is exceeding capacity, with 42% stating it was substantially above capacity. Giving evidence to the Times Health Commission⁶, Professor Kamila Hawthorne, Royal College of GPs chairwoman, warned of the potentially catastrophic consequences for primary care services in England, cautioning that more than a quarter of GP surgeries were at risk of closure due to workload pressures. And recognising the serious nature of the situation faced by her colleagues, Dr Ursula Mason, chair for the Royal College of GPs in Northern Ireland, stated in an interview⁷: "Practices are really struggling; demand continues to grow far beyond manageable levels and rising costs mean that it is very difficult to make ends meet."

Such statistics make it difficult to overstate the urgent nature of the situation. Morale among the hard-pressed staff is suffering, with concomitant effects on recruitment and retention. For primary care services, the need for change is compelling.

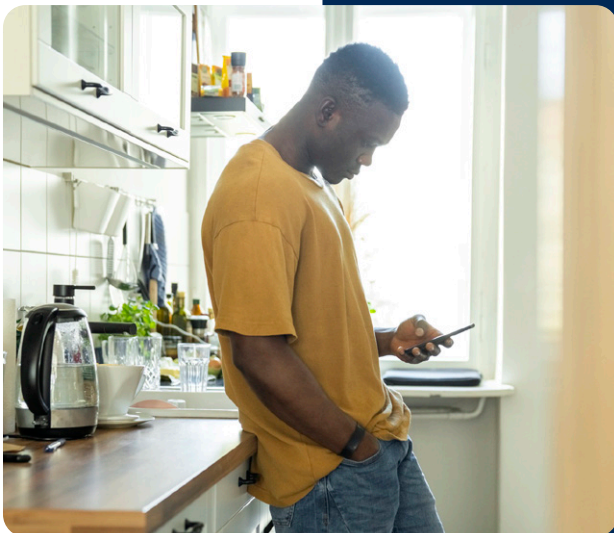


However, though the challenges ahead are substantial, they are not insurmountable. Forward thinking teams are finding cause for optimism. Throughout the pandemic, staff demonstrated extraordinary resilience in the face of adversity. By embracing innovative technologies, they were able to transform working practices and the ways in which services were delivered. The lessons of Covid-19 were learned well – now is the time for them to be applied once more. Digitalisation, underpinned by the latest in communications technology, can power the change that is needed, lightening the load for a workforce that has already achieved so much.

Ending the 8am rush

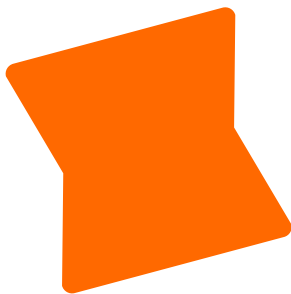


The Government has acknowledged the need to act, unveiling plans to reform and modernise primary care. Aiming to end the so-called “8am rush”, the delivery plan for Modern General Practice Access⁸ has been backed by funding of £240 million to support practices using analogue telephone lines to switch to digital.

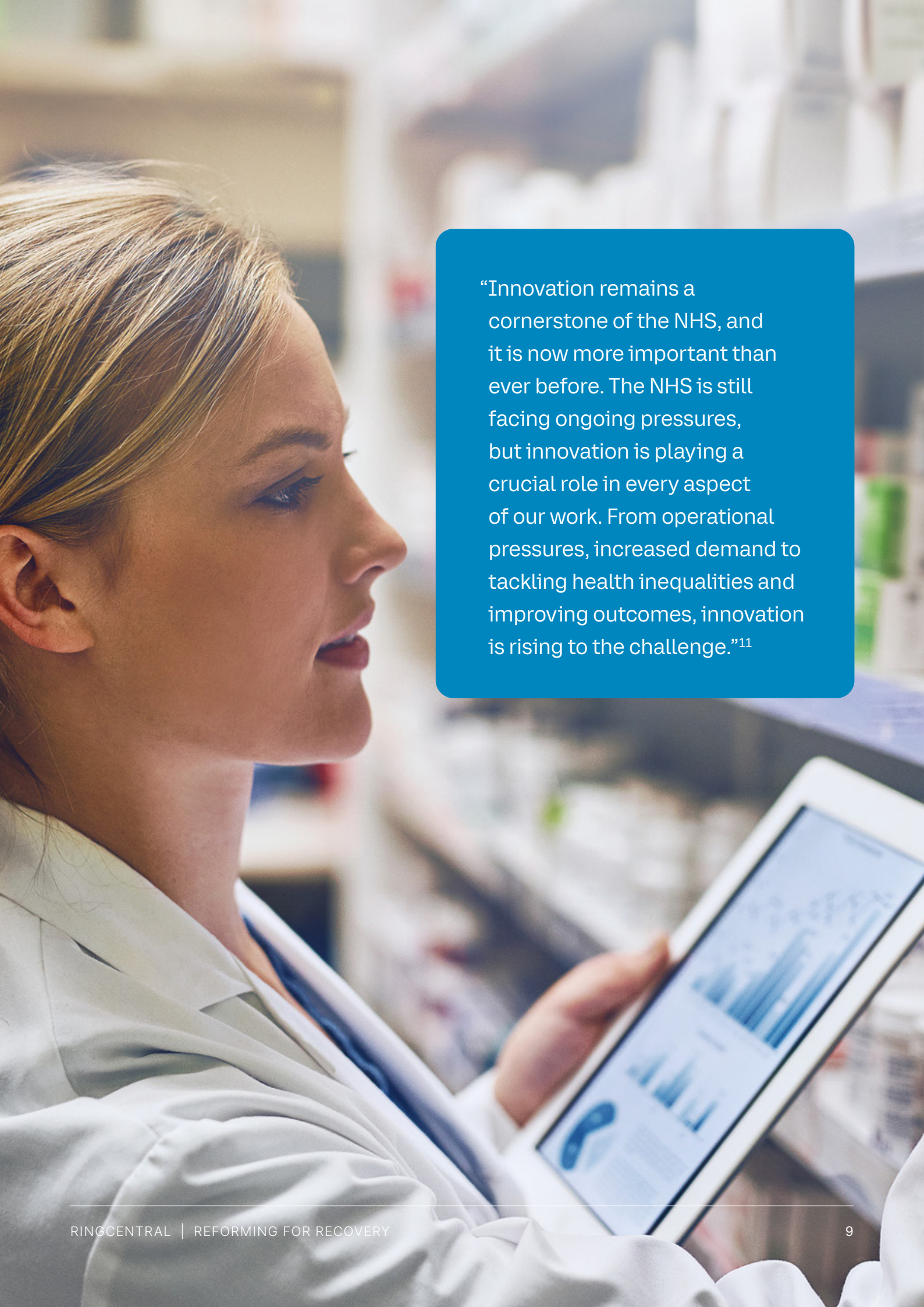


"Digital technology has the potential to transform how people access primary care, how services are delivered and how we plan care to better meet the needs of local communities."⁹

- Dr Claire Fuller, CEO (designate)
Surrey Heartlands ICS




Evidence suggest the public is ready to embrace innovation. In England alone, more than 30 million¹⁰ people have already signed up to use the NHS App, indicating citizens are increasingly comfortable with health and care technologies. Now, more than ever before, it is vital to ensure that opportunities are grasped. For providers of primary health and care, merely maintaining the status quo is no longer an option.



“Innovation remains a cornerstone of the NHS, and it is now more important than ever before. The NHS is still facing ongoing pressures, but innovation is playing a crucial role in every aspect of our work. From operational pressures, increased demand to tackling health inequalities and improving outcomes, innovation is rising to the challenge.”¹¹

Connecting to integrate for innovative service delivery



Fully integrated health and care provision has long been an ambition of governments regardless of political hue. Strategies such as the NHS Long Term Plan¹² set out aspirations for a sustainable health and care system made possible through digital transformation.

Effective communications solutions are the essential foundation allowing services to be fully joined-up, handing control to patients and enabling streamlined collaboration between primary care and the multiplicity of secondary providers and partner organisations working to maintain the health of the nation. Integration creates a win: win situation, helping to reduce workloads while ultimately delivering better outcomes. Pre-emptive healthcare becomes a reality, with preventative treatments further reducing the pressure on resources throughout the system.



“There are real opportunities for a step change towards more personalised, more preventative, more community-based services.”

- Matthew Taylor CBE FAcSS, Chief Executive, NHS Confederation¹³

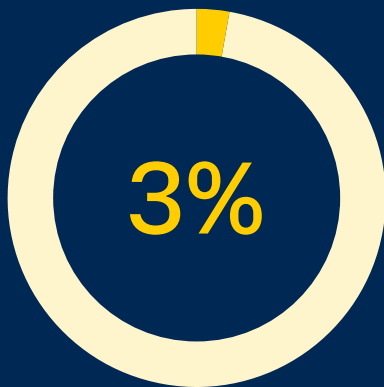
However, the rhetoric has not always been matched by the results. Data from the GovNews/RingCentral survey shows a tendency for organisations within this sector to rely on traditional communications channels such as mail and fax.

11%

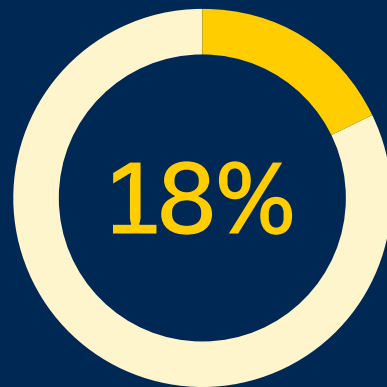
of respondents across the public sector are still using post for inter-team communications.

27%

is the comparative figure in the primary care arena.



of the public sector in general are still using fax.



but an almost six-fold increase can be seen in primary care.

To fully realise the potential of the latest technological advances, teams must work to incite a culture of change and ensure knowledge gaps are closed. The survey shows that primary health and care is ahead of the curve in certain aspects, for example migration of telephony to the cloud...



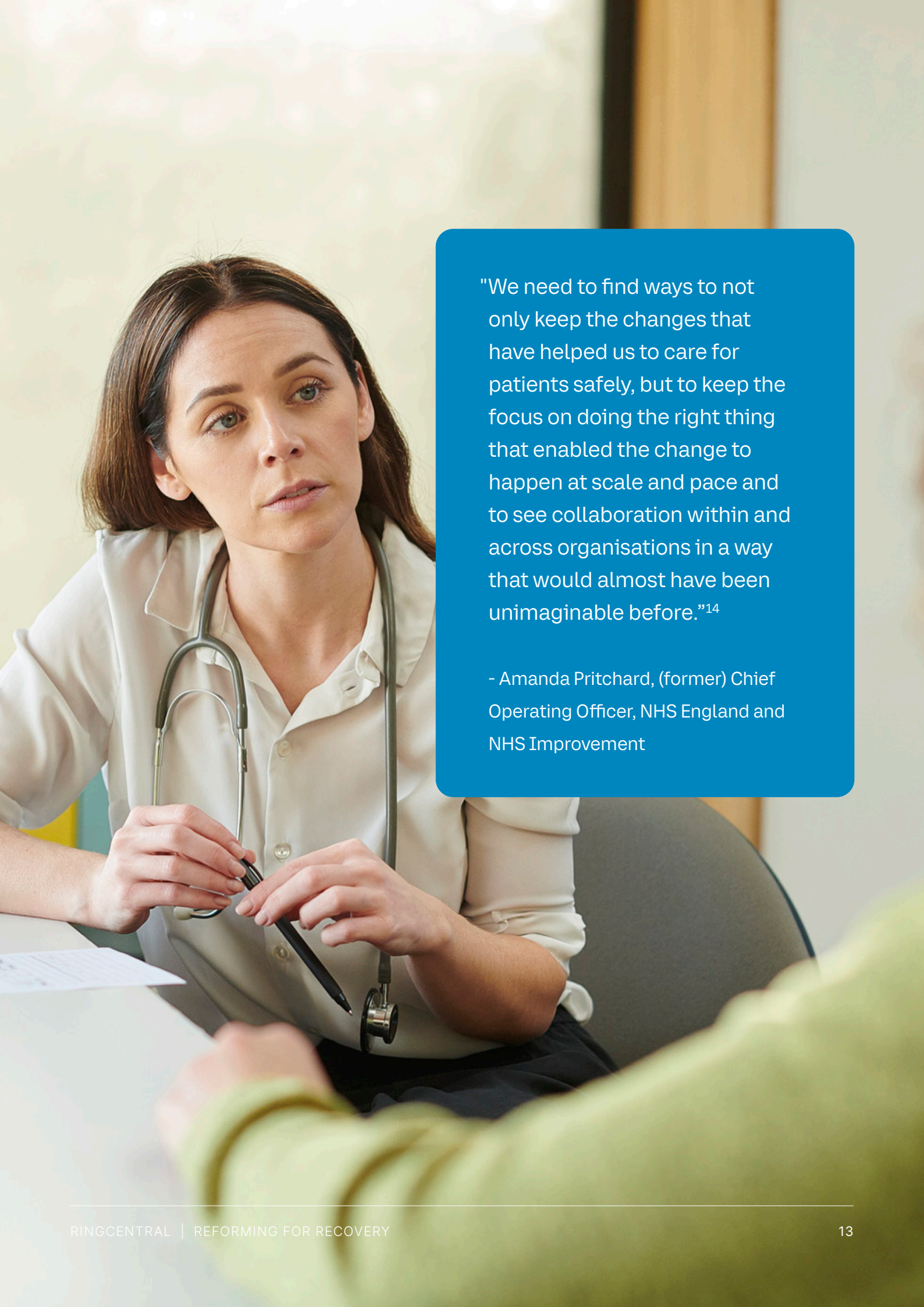
63%

Primary health and care



53%

Public sector



"We need to find ways to not only keep the changes that have helped us to care for patients safely, but to keep the focus on doing the right thing that enabled the change to happen at scale and pace and to see collaboration within and across organisations in a way that would almost have been unimaginable before."¹⁴

- Amanda Pritchard, (former) Chief Operating Officer, NHS England and NHS Improvement

Cloud-based unified communications solutions can deliver immediate results. Working alongside existing IT, operations are streamlined to both reduce pressure on staff and provide an enhanced service to citizens. Yet the survey shows more than a third of organisations have not taken advantage of the quick wins these platforms can offer.



More than 90% of direct patient experience of the NHS is through the primary care network¹⁵ and as the bedrock of the service, GP practices deliver more than 1 million consultations¹⁶ every working day. The latest phone technology can increase patients' ability to reach their practice by almost a third¹⁷ with online appointments made more easily available to those preferring the option.

The upside potential is huge. Reliable, cost-effective and secure communications are already optimising workplaces throughout the health and care arena, improving conditions for the workforce, empowering patient choice and ensuring enhanced outcomes across the board.

Forward-thinking teams are taking their service from the realms of the good and going on to achieve excellence. It is time to look again at the latest innovations. It is time to embrace the power of connection.

"Over the last 75 years, the NHS has always innovated and adapted to meet the needs of each generation and as we approach the 75th birthday, we are doing that for primary care services – providing easy and convenient care as close to home as possible."¹⁸

- Amanda Pritchard, NHS Chief Executive

The time is now



The NHS has reached a defining moment. At every level, there is broad acceptance that change is imperative to the very survival of the service in its present form.

Though the pandemic's impact was undoubtedly severe, it also showed that change is possible. Reacting with speed and agility, primary care providers were able to transform their operations almost overnight, ensuring continuity of service in those most trying of circumstances. There is no reason to doubt they will be successful in their response to the turbulent times in which they find themselves today.

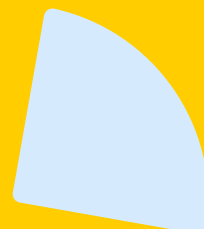
The appetite for change among a dedicated workforce that is ready and able to move forward is clear. Time and again, staff have demonstrated their resilience, achieving so much during the most difficult of times. It is time for primary care organisations, at the sharp end of health and care provision, to reap the rewards of modernisation.

Innovation never stands still. The dream of seamlessly joined-up services is in sight. By streamlining communications, organisations are empowered to make huge strides towards reaching the goal of fully integrated health and care. In choosing the right partner to support their digital journey, primary care providers are laying strong foundations, building healthier, fairer communities and powering towards excellence for the next 75 years and beyond.



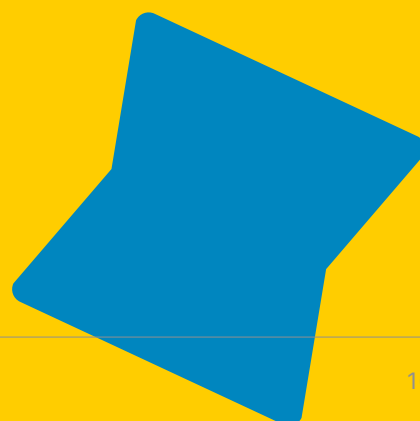
About RingCentral

RingCentral, is a leading provider of unified communications (message, video, phone), customer engagement, and contact centre solutions for businesses worldwide.



More flexible and cost-effective than legacy on-premises PBX and video conferencing systems that it replaces, RingCentral empowers modern mobile and distributed workforces to communicate, collaborate and connect via any mode, any device, and any location.

In the UK Public Sector and education space, RingCentral is leading the market with a cloud native business communications platform that works with existing technologies such as Microsoft Teams to deliver on smarter and hybrid working strategies.



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