

Real Talk With Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust

“We now give our patients the choice of receiving their outpatient appointment information by post or digitally (by email). As far as we know, we’re the first acute trust to achieve this at scale, and Xerox has played a key part.”

– Damien Bruty, General Manager: Outpatients
Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust



OUR CHALLENGE

“We had been inspected by our regulators, the Care Quality Commission, who raised some concerns about the responsiveness of communication with patients in the previous year. One of the processes at the heart of the matter was a failure to routinely dispatch appointment letters promptly after receiving their GP referral letter. Patient feedback showed frustration over letters that arrived late or, on occasion, not at all.

In exploring possible solutions, we knew we wanted to exploit digital communication as far as possible. Not just because that could help us be more responsive, but also because it was increasingly what patients wanted.”

OUR SOLUTION

“We discovered that a hybrid mail service could meet our needs; so we invited tenders through the London Procurement Partnership framework for Managed Document Service — and chose Xerox.

To the best of our knowledge, we were the first NHS trust to embark on a migration from physical to digital mail at this scale: around 1.5 million appointment letters every year. We knew they wouldn’t all convert to digital immediately, so we needed confidence that the service provider could handle both the paper and digital routes equally reliably, and smoothly move patients from one to the other at scale.

Xerox gave us that confidence, and together we’ve built a service that really works.”

OUR RESULTS

“Through this work, patients are hearing from us more quickly, reliably, and consistently, whether they choose either regular post or email. In our latest inspection report, our rapid improvement in this area was noted, with patient communication listed as an area of outstanding practice.”

- Successful phased rollout of Xerox® Hybrid Mail Service for all appointment letters:
 - 6 months: traditional post
 - 3 months later: email for opted-in patients
- Confirmation through patient surveys that email is at least as reliable as post, sometimes more so (100% vs 93% in one survey)
- More joined-up and consistent communication about appointments.
- 24% of appointment letters sent by email within 12 months of launching the digital service (more than double the trust’s first-year target)
- Better control of patient contact data quality
- 20% cost reduction within the first year
- £1m savings over 4 years

NOT AFRAID TO BE FIRST

It has taken focus and commitment, but in less than a year **Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust** has rolled out a digital communication capability for all five of its hospital sites, starting from scratch.

By 'starting from scratch', we mean the trust needed to:

- Develop a robust information governance process to support digital communication.
- Develop a communication process that would allow the trust to send hundreds (ultimately scaling to thousands) of emails every day; not to mention dealing with delivery failures and opt-outs.
- Innovate without an opportunity to learn from other trust rollouts of this nature.

"We couldn't find another acute trust that had achieved this," says Damien Bruty, general manager for outpatient services at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust. "But by taking it step by step, we've delivered a digital service beyond expectations."

A TALE OF TWO PROJECTS

After awarding the hybrid mail contract to Xerox, the trust started preparing in parallel for two outcomes:

- Migration of its existing printing and posting requirements.
- Conversion of paper-based communication to digital.

Both initiatives were managed by Eamonn O'Dwyer, the trust's project manager for all things connected with the hybrid mail service.

TRADITIONAL, ONLY BETTER

Migration of the paper-based process took six months from contract to go-live, covering all appointments made by the trust's centralised booking and admission functions —some 5,000 appointments booked daily through the Cerner patient administration system. Since then, the trust has also migrated departments that still book their own appointments, including the imaging department, which uses a separate radiology information system.

In preparing for these migrations, O'Dwyer worked closely with outpatient clinic teams and inpatient specialities to specify their requirements.

"Because the automated hybrid mail service prints and collates documents so much more efficiently," says O'Dwyer, "we took the opportunity to make improvements."

- Leaflets that previously were handed to patients on arrival are now sent out with appointment letters.
- If more than one appointment is made for a single patient within 24 hours, the letters are combined in a single posting.
- Templates have also been standardised to improve communication consistency across letter types and more than 70 patient information leaflets.

PAPER TO DIGITAL IN JUST 9 MONTHS

In preparing for the digital service, O'Dwyer and Bruty worked with the trust's corporate communication and patient liaison teams to develop specifications for email templates.

But first the trust adapted its outpatient check-in kiosks to include opt-in fields for paperless communication. When the email service went live, three months after the postal service, these opt-ins accounted for 14% of outgoing mail, well ahead of expectation.

BEDDING IN THE PROCESS

For six months after digital go-live, opted-in patients received appointment letters (and associated leaflets) both as email attachments and by post. As a first adopter in the NHS, the trust wanted time to test the digital process and gauge patient reaction before switching off paper for anyone.

It also wanted time to develop a web application for hospital staff to use at any point of patient contact, to sign them up for the email service.

"In the months of dual running, surveys told us that patients were happy with the digital communication, and that it was even more reliable than the postal service," says Bruty. "For example, one survey told us that while 93% of hard-copy letters had been received, 100% of emails and attachments had been opened. So we felt confident about relying on the digital process."

Today, close to 90,000 patients have opted in, equating to 24% of appointment letters sent by email.

MEASURABLE RESULTS

Besides knowing that digital communication is working better for patients, Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust is making hard savings.

"Combining digital conversion with savings in paper, print and postage," says Bruty, "Xerox is saving us around 20% through its hybrid mail service — double our first-year target. Our ambition is to reach a 40% saving by the end of four years."

Find out more at
xerox.co.uk/hybridmail