

SMS - Count before you Send

Effective SMS Usage Toolkit

Digital Facilitation Team
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Improving Lives Together

Introduction

SMS messages have become integral to Practices in communicating with patients about their care. Currently, Sussex Practices are sending over **1 million SMS messages each month, these SMS are made up of over 3 million fragments**. These fragments do come at a cost to NHS Sussex ICB and this cost is growing. For example in 2021/22, **£406,000** was spent on SMS messages in Sussex, by 2022/23 this cost had risen to **£784,000**.*

The **Count before you Send** campaign and work programme is not necessarily about reducing the number of messages being sent to patients and we know some long messages are necessary; the aim is to help you achieve efficiencies by ensuring the SMS messages are as short, clear and succinct as possible. We want to encourage all Practice staff who send SMS messages to 'count the characters' in their SMS messages 'before they send'.

Reducing SMS wastage isn't necessarily about reducing the number of messages being sent, this toolkit aims to demonstrate how SMS messaging can be used more effectively without compromising on important messages needed for patient care.

*SMS usage and cost data provided to NHS Sussex by BT/EE

The purpose of this Toolkit

This toolkit will cover:

- **Understanding SMS messages**
Explaining what makes up an SMS message i.e., fragments and characters
- **Helpful Tips**
Providing some easy and helpful tips and examples to help you reduce SMS size
- **Batch messaging**
Exploring using targeted batch messaging and any alternatives that could be used in place. Also focusing on messages that are being sent to multiple patients
- **Other considerations**
Explore elements Practices should be aware of; such as failed messages as well as developments around NHS App Messaging
- **Further information and resources**
Providing clear guidance to the resources available from specific provider products

Introduction to the **Count before you Send** campaign

This video provides a short overview of SMS messages and fragments.

Please share it with any team members of your Practice team who send SMS messages in your Practice.



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Section 1

This section will look to aid your understanding of SMS messages. It will explain what fragments are and the costs associated to them; how to know how many characters you are using; and what to look out for in some pre-populated templates

Understanding SMS Messages

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Understanding Fragments

What are 'fragments'?

When an SMS is sent, although it appears as a single message to the user and the patient, it is actually split into chunks of around 160 characters, each called 'fragments'. SMS costs are calculated based on the usage of these fragments. 1 fragment is approximately 160 characters of text (as shown below).

1 Fragment SMS

0-160 character
SMS message

= just under 2p

2 Fragment SMS

161-306 character
SMS message

= just under 4p

3 Fragment SMS

307-459 character
SMS message

= just under 6p



Understanding Fragments

The cost of fragments

While the cost of a single SMS may seem low, if a Practice sends that same message out to a large patient group the cost can increase significantly. This is demonstrated in the examples below.

1 Fragment SMS

1 Fragment x 10,000 patients
= Approx £200

2 Fragment SMS

2 Fragments x 10,000 patients
= Approx £400

3 Fragment SMS

3 Fragments x 10,000 patients
= Approx £600



Understanding Fragments

The cost of fragments

The table below details the approximate cost of sending SMS messages to different patient list sizes

List Size	1 Fragment SMS cost	2 Fragment SMS cost	3 Fragment SMS cost
1000 – 2000	£20 - £40	£40 - £80	£60 - £120
2000 – 3000	£40 - £60	£80 - £120	£120 - £180
3000 – 4000	£60 - £80	£120 - £160	£180 - £240
4000 – 5000	£80 - £100	£160 - £200	£240 - £300
5000 – 6000	£100 - £120	£200 - £240	£300 - £360
6000 – 7000	£120 - £140	£240 - £280	£360 - £420
7000 – 8000	£140 - £160	£280 - £320	£420 - £480
8000 – 9000	£160 - £180	£320 - £360	£480 - £540
9000 – 10000	£180 - £200	£360 - £400	£540 - £600

Therefore, based on the costs above, sending a single, long (3 fragment) SMS to 10,000 patients could cost the NHS £600 at the push of a button



Character Counting

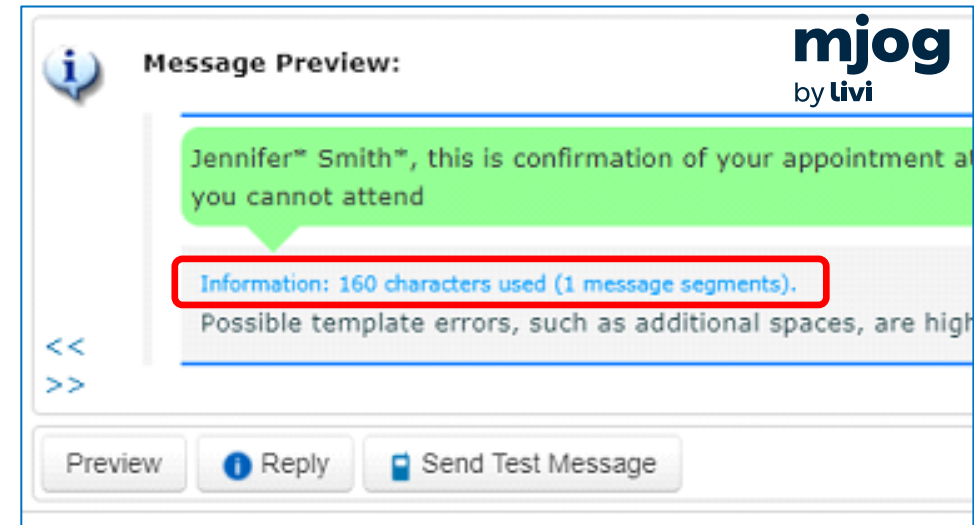
How do I know how many characters I have used?

Each SMS provider in Sussex indicates the number of characters you have used when you are creating your message. If you haven't spotted this before here is where it can be located on each product.



The screenshot shows the Accurx interface for a patient named Michelle Power. At the top right, the Accurx logo is visible. Below the patient details, there is a 'Consent' status. A search bar for templates is present. At the bottom right of the message preview area, a red box highlights the character count '103/612'.

The accurx counter states the number of characters you have used and not the fragment count. 612 characters is the upper limit and equates to 4 fragment message (costing 8p per patient).



The screenshot shows the MJOG interface for a message preview. The MJOG logo is at the top right. A message preview is shown in a green bubble. Below the preview, a red box highlights the text 'Information: 160 characters used (1 message segments)'. At the bottom, there are buttons for 'Preview', 'Reply', and 'Send Test Message'.

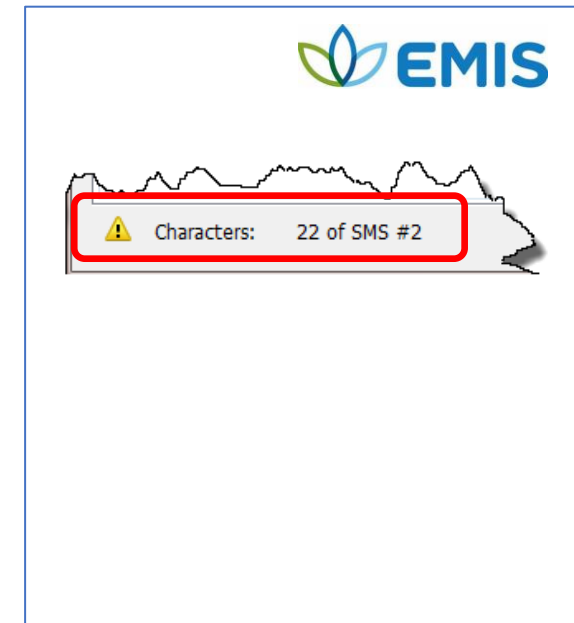
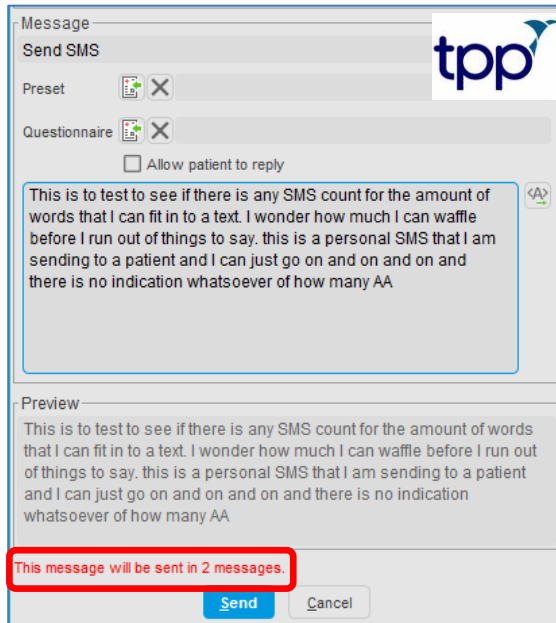
The MJOG counter states the number of characters you have used and the fragment count, although they use the word segment instead of fragment



Character Counting

Character Counting

Some providers make it very clear if you have gone over 1 fragment, some just give you the characters used and no other warnings





Character Counting

How do I know how many characters I have used?

Using an online character counter can also help to check the characters you have used in your message.

We advise not to use Microsoft Word to count characters or copy and paste from it as this will not be accurate when counting characters.

We suggest: [Textr Character Counter](#)

Be aware that spaces between lines, full stops, commas and other special characters can equate to a lot of characters just on their own.

Message

Appointment Confirmation
 Monday 28/03/23 at 8.30am
 Location: South Forest Medical Centre
 Nurse: Kellie
 PLEASE DO NOT REPLY TO THIS MESSAGE

Characters: 138/160 Segments: 1

Results

A	p	p	o	i	n	t	m	e	n	t		C	o	n	f	i	r	m	a	t	i	o	n
	M	o	n	d	a	y		2	8	/	0	3	/	2	3		a	t		8	.	3	0
a	m		L	o	c	a	t	i	o	n	:		S	o	u	t	h		F	o	r	e	s
t		M	e	d	i	c	a	l		C	e	n	t	r	e		N	u	r	s	e	:	
K	e	l	l	i	e		P	L	E	A	S	E		D	O		N	O	T		R	E	P

Unicode Character: 0

Regular 7bit character, present in GSM7 character set

Unicode character, Character not present in GSM character set.



Character Counting

How do I know how many characters I have used?

SMS messages equate the number of characters based on the language standards that are used.

For example, using letters, numbers and standard punctuation from the standard English alphabet will not impact the fragment size of **160 characters**.

However, if special characters (known as Unicode characters) are chosen outside of the standard English language these can count as more characters and can reduce the size of 1 fragment from 160 to **70 characters**.

Therefore it is important to double check your SMS messages using a character counter like the one we suggested on the previous slide, which will highlight any Unicode characters.

In the example shown, the 'Grave Accent' has been inserted, which is a Unicode character, and the counter is limited to 70

The screenshot shows a character counter interface. At the top, a red magnifying glass highlights a grave accent character (`) in the message text: "I have used special character ` this has changed my fragment limit". Below the message input, a red box highlights the status: "Characters: 66/70 Segments: 1". Underneath, a "Results" section shows a grid of characters from the message. The grave accent character is highlighted in red, indicating it is a Unicode character. A legend below the grid shows a red box for "Unicode Character" and a white box for "Regular 7bit character, present in GSM7 character set". A small box at the bottom left of the results section shows "Unicode Character" and the count "1".



Pre-populated Templates

Be aware that some SMS providers have some pre-populated elements as mandatory fields which take from your character allowance and could contribute to repetition without you realising.

These elements can be added to your SMS message, but they are not shown on the preview.

This example of the Accurx message preview shows the mandatory elements that are being added:

- **The patient's name**
- **The sender's name**
- **The Practice name**

You can see from the counter on the right that these pre-populated elements have already taken 60 characters before you've even written your message.

The screenshot shows a 'Compose a message' window. At the top, it says 'Compose a message' with window control icons. Below that, the recipient is identified as 'MOUSE, Minnie (Mrs)' with a share icon. Underneath, patient details are listed: 'NHS: 999 999 9999 · DOB: 05-May-1959 (62y) · Gender: Female'. The next line shows the contact type as 'Mobile' with a dropdown arrow and the number '07515359377', followed by a 'Consent' status with a checkmark. A search bar contains the text 'Search for a template or questionnaire' and a 'Browse' button. At the bottom right, a character count shows '60/612'. Two red boxes highlight the pre-populated text: 'Dear Mrs Mouse,' and 'Thanks, Sam Tucker Accurx Practice (29392)'.

Section 2

This section will provide some checks you can do before and after you send a message; advise utilising templates with some examples of where characters/fragments could be reduced.

Helpful Tips for reducing SMS fragments

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Simple things to do every time you send a message



Check you have the patient's correct verified mobile number (and consent to send to it)



Check that the message benefits the clinical care of the patient and is not related to marketing. Gaining financially from sending an SMS message to a patient would be marketing (i.e., A company asks the Practice to send an SMS to patients on their behalf, however it wasn't related to patient care and they would financially gain from it)



If it is a long, detailed message, consider if the message could be sent another way such as via verified, consented email - [using the \[secure\] prefix if it contains patient information if using Outlook](#). (Email is not available in EMIS.)



Consider if you need to send it as an SMS message. Some messages to patients may be more suitable being shared on the Practice website or social media.



SMS Template Housekeeping

We recommend checking your SMS templates that you may have created within your SMS products.

Check the **character count**, look out for **repetition of information** and **special characters**.

You may have SMS templates for things such as:

- Appointment reminders/confirmations
- Questionnaires
- Long term conditions
- Appointment invites e.g., blood tests, diabetic or asthma reviews



If you don't use SMS templates in your Practice, this may be a beneficial way to save time for staff who send a regular message to patients. Templates ensure you have checked the character count, to help reduce SMS wastage



Making a good template



Write out your message as normal



Remove any duplicated words or phrases, this may mean a bit of rewording



Remove any unnecessary words



Can you use any shorter words? e.g. 'call' instead of 'phone call'



Remove double spaces, extra punctuation, or double line breaks



The shorter the message, the better for reading on a mobile





Check SMS Characters

How can this SMS example be modified to reduce the characters?

Confirmation of appointment.
Date: Monday 28/03/23.
Time: 8:30am.
Location: South Forest Medical Centre.
Nurse: Kellie.
Thank you,
South Forest Medical Centre.
PLEASE DO NOT RESPOND TO THIS MESSAGE.
southforestmedical@nhs.net

233 characters, SMS cost = 4p



Appointment Confirmation
Monday 28/03/23 at
8.30am
Location: South Forest Medical Centre
Nurse: Kellie
PLEASE DO NOT REPLY TO THIS MESSAGE

138 characters, SMS cost = 2p



Check SMS Characters

Where we made those savings on Characters and Fragments

Confirmation of appointment.

Date: Monday 28/03/23.

Time: 8:30am.

Location: South Forest Medical Centre.

Nurse: Kellie.

Thank you,

South Forest Medical Centre.

PLEASE DO NOT **RESPOND** TO THIS MESSAGE.

southforestmedical@nhs.net

This has saved 95 characters and has not lost the key information in the message

- Removed words like 'Date' and 'Time'
- Removed full stops and commas
- Removed pleasantries like 'Thank you'
- Removed the Practice name as this is in the location, therefore duplication
- Shortened the word 'Respond' to 'Reply'
- Removed the email address on the end



Check SMS Characters

Example Friends and Family Test Template modified to reduce characters

Dear Ms Example,
We would be very grateful if you could take the time to complete our Friends and Family Test online form- please click on the link below.
The NHS Friends and Family Test (FFT) is an important opportunity for you to provide quick and anonymous feedback on the services that provide your care and treatment. Your feedback will help both ourselves and NHS England to improve services for everyone.
<https://forms.gle/X7Nn7qPynoVzPCAs9>
Thanks,
South Forest Medical Centre

488 characters, SMS cost = 8p



Dear Ms Example,
Please complete our Friends and Family Test online at
<https://forms.gle/X7Nn7qPynoVzPCAs9>
This is an opportunity for you to give anonymous feedback on the care service received, which helps us and NHS England improve services for everyone.
South Forest Medical Centre

289 characters, SMS cost = 4p



Check SMS Characters

Where we made those savings on Characters and Fragments

Dear Ms Example,

We would be very grateful if you could take the time to complete our Friends and Family Test online form- please click on the link below.

The NHS friends and family test (FFT) is an important opportunity for you to provide quick and anonymous feedback on the services that provide your care and treatment. Your feedback will help both ourselves and NHS England to improve services for everyone.
<https://forms.gle/X7Nn7qPynoVzPCAs9>

Thanks,

South Forest Medical Centre

This has saved 191 characters and has not lost the key information in the message

- Replaced 'we would be very grateful if you could take the time to' with 'Please'
- Moved the link up to where it is mentioned
- Removed duplicate Friends and Family Test
- Moved elements of the message around
- Reworded the information to be more succinct

488 characters, SMS cost = 8p



Check SMS Characters

Example Flu Vaccine Template modified to reduce characters count

Dear Mrs Example, We are contacting patients who have not yet had the flu vaccine. If you want the vaccine, please contact us to book. If you don't want it or have had it elsewhere please use the link below to let us know so we can update our records. Kind regards South Forest Medical Centre Please complete this questionnaire:
<https://questy.exempl.com/jb3nf4rb3q>
South Forest Medical Centre

392 characters, SMS cost = 6p



Dear Mrs Example, our records show that you have not yet had the flu vaccine. To book it, please contact us. If you don't want it or have had it elsewhere please complete this questionnaire:
<https://questy.exempl.com/jb3nf4rb3q>
South Forest Medical Centre

256 characters, SMS cost = 4p



Check SMS Characters

Where we made those savings on Characters and Fragments

Dear Mrs Example, **We are contacting patients who** have not yet had the flu vaccine. **If you want the vaccine,** please contact us **to book.** If you don't want it or have had it elsewhere please **use the link below to let us know so we can update our records.** Kind regards **South Forest Medical Centre** Please complete this questionnaire: <https://questy.exempl.com/jb3nf4rb3qSouth Forest Medical Centre>

392 characters, SMS cost = 6p

This has saved 136 characters and has not lost the key information in the message

- Replaced 'we are contacting patients who' with 'our records show that you'
- Moved elements of the message around
- Reworded the information to be more succinct
- Removed extra words
- Removed duplicate Practice name
- Ensured that the link would work as expected by having a space / line break between the questionnaire link and the Practice name



Test with a Dummy Patient

We suggest using a dummy patient on your clinical system to **test your SMS message templates** before you send it out to patients, particularly for messages you are **sending to high numbers of patients**.

Select a dummy patient in your clinical system and update their mobile number with your mobile number to test with.

It can be useful to see how your message will look for a patient:

- Check for repetition of information
- Check it is clear for patient to read
- Check if your SMS provider adds anything to your SMS message when you send it, such as signing off with the Practice name or person sending it, or your Practice email address.



Section 3

Batch messaging allows you to send the same text message to a group of patients at once. This section will look at how to do targeted batch messaging and any alternatives that could be used in place of batch messaging.

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Batch Messaging

Batch messaging is a great way to send the same SMS message to a cohort of patients quickly.

With batch messaging it is important that the message being sent to multiple patients is as succinct and short as possible.

If the message is a couple of characters over the fragment limit this makes a bigger impact to SMS wastage as this cost is multiplied for each patient the SMS is sent to.

Count before you send!

3 Fragment
SMS message
= just under 6p



x 6,000 patients
= Approx £360





Targeted Batch Messaging

When using batch messaging it is best practice to send care related messages to only those patients that it is relevant for.

You could use a report / search in your clinical system to identify the correct cohort of patients and ensure your message is reaching the right people.

The clinical system reporting allows you to get very specific. We recommend you consider some of the following criteria to produce a report of a cohort of patients rather than sending a message to your full patient list:

- Age criteria
- Gender criteria
- Clinical codes
- Test results
- Eligible for flu
- High BP



How to export your report as a CSV file required for sending out Batch messages on

- [EMIS](#)
- [SystemOne](#)



Alternatives to Batch Messaging

Using batch messaging to send operational information or holiday greetings which isn't directly related to patient care could have a big impact to SMS volumes and cost.

Some things to think about:

- Could you use your **Practice website** or **social media page** to communicate non-care related announcements instead?
- Could you use your **answerphone message** to relay the same information to a patient, should they call the Practice?
- If the message needed to be sent, could you **reduce the fragment size**?

Dear Mr Smith,

We wanted to let you know that the surgery is closed tomorrow and Monday due to the Easter bank holiday.

Should you need any medical assistance please contact 999 if it is an emergency or call NHS 111.

Have a lovely weekend

Thanks, Denise
South Forest Surgery

Example of a 282 character (2 fragment) SMS message sent to a list size of 10,000 patients at a cost of £400

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Section 4

This section will look at some other areas that need to be taken into account when dealing with SMS messages; Failed messages how they may occur and how they could be prevented; NHS App messaging development.

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Failed Messages

Failed messages are SMS messages that the Practice has sent to the patient but have not been delivered.

Failed messages can occur for a few reasons, due to the patient's phone or phone number:

- Being switched off
- Being recorded incorrectly on the clinical system
- Being recorded on the clinical system, but is no longer valid

Even though failed messages do not reach the patient as intended, failed messages incur the same fragment costs as if they have been sent successfully. This contributes to SMS wastage.





Failed Messages

We recognise failed messages can occur for reasons outside of a Practice's control or responsibility.

If you receive notifications in your clinical system or from your SMS provider, indicating high numbers of failed SMS messages, it is possible to put something in place to reduce this.

Introduce a clinical system protocol (to appear for the relevant staff groups) which will highlight if a mobile number needs checking and verifying with a patient should they interact with the Practice.

The Digital Facilitation Team can help you if you're unsure of how to set up a protocol to achieve this.





NHS App Messaging

What is it?

The NHS App messaging service provides a secure inbox that will allow patients to start receiving messages from health and care services such as their GP surgery via the NHS App if they have installed on their smartphone and have enabled notifications, instead of traditional channels like SMS or letter.

Is it available now?

- This functionality is live for [MJOG](#) and [iPlato](#)
- **AccuRx** have just finished their pilot of sending messages to the NHS App. Estimated go live is **Autumn 2023**
- **SystemOne/EMIS** are not currently sending messages to the NHS App
- One way batch messaging is the only type of message that can currently be received in the NHS App at this time. NHS England are working to introduce other message types in the future





NHS App Messaging

How does it work?

- Practices create and send their message in the same way using their SMS provider of choice
- The provider will automatically attempt to send the message by the NHS App first
- If it is not possible to send to the NHS App first, the SMS provider will default to send a normal SMS message
- Patients will get a notification from the NHS App when they receive a message in their secure inbox, **if they have notifications enabled on their device**. It is the patient's choice whether to receive messages in this way





NHS App Messaging

What are the benefits?

- **Saves money:**

The NHS spends millions of pounds on SMS costs each year. The NHS App messaging service is available to NHS commissioned services for free

- **More reliable:**

NHS App messaging means even if a patient changes their contact details, it will still be possible to contact them

- **More secure:**

Patients will always know who messages come from, rather than seeing messages from unidentified mobile numbers



Section 5

This section provides information on available resources provided by product services and some useful contacts.

Further Information & Resources

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Where to find further information

Further general support and other resources are available from SMS providers online:

accurx	mjog	iPlato (myGP)	SystemOne
General Support	General Support	General Support	General Support
Batch Messaging	Batch Messaging	Batch Messaging	EMIS
Single Messages	Single Messages	Single Messages	General Support
Message Templates	Message Templates	Message Templates	
Appointment Reminders	Appointment Reminders	Appointment Reminders	



Useful contacts

Senior Digital Facilitators

Tom Fletcher, Senior Digital Facilitator
Workstream Lead
sxicb.seniordigitalfacilitators@nhs.net

Information Governance

Laura Taw, Data Protection Officer for Sussex
South, Central and West (SCW) CSU
laurataw@nhs.net

Safeguarding

NHS Sussex Safeguarding Team
sxicb.safeguarding@nhs.net

Digital Facilitation Team

Digital Facilitation Team Inbox (Email)
Monitored daily
sxicb.digitalfacilitators@nhs.net

Digital Facilitation Support Channel (Teams)
Monitored daily
[EMIS Practices](#)
[SystemOne Practices](#)

Find out who your Digital Facilitator is:
[Do you know who your Digital Facilitator is? - NHS Sussex \(ics.nhs.uk\)](#)