

Briefing: 054/17: How to improve your connection and HSCN

This Community Pharmacy England Briefing provides community pharmacy owners with information about the Health and Social Care Network (HSCN), and tips on how to best procure and use your IT connection.

Background

In 2004, BT was awarded the sole contract to provide and maintain 'a health network of networks'. This network helped pharmacies to connect with NHS resources, e.g. access to EPS and the central NHS '[Spine](#)'. BT's legacy network was later re-branded as the HSCN 'Transition Network'. The HSCN programme is managed by NHS England's Transformation Directorate (NHSE's TD) and they allow other companies to [apply](#) to become direct suppliers of HSCN-endorsed connections. This market of NHS-endorsed connectivity, will therefore no longer be a sole-supplier market.

With the development of HSCN, NHSE's TD aim to promote a competitive health connection marketplace, i.e. one that improves choice, innovation and value for money. All pharmacy owners live with EPS Release 2 connect to the HSCN. Pharmacy access to HSCN does not reduce the importance of continuing to ensure that pharmacies have cyber security protections in place; see [Briefing 053/17 Data and cyber security protections](#).

Methods for connecting to HSCN

Pharmacy owners should review their connection options from time-to-time, e.g. when first opening, or prior to renewing/negotiating future connection-related contracts. There are three main connection methods:

1. **Through pharmacy system suppliers** that arrange a connection, e.g. via an intermediate '[aggregator](#)' company they have selected. The aggregator company usually draws connectivity from a HSCN connectivity supplier. Some pharmacy system suppliers have

historically offered 'all-in-one-packages' in which a PMR system, hardware, system upgrades and a connection are all provided.

2. **Arranging a connection** with a commercial network provider.
3. **A direct connection** to HSCN.

Previous model: In the past, the common connection model for pharmacy owners had been:



New model: HSCN connectivity could be arranged directly:



Selecting your connection: discussion points

When you are selecting or negotiating for your connection contract, consider discussing each of these with prospective connectivity suppliers:

- **Item one; Service levels:** What are the usual service and performance levels being offered by the connection supplier? What are the resilience levels and arrangements for business continuity in place? Will contract provisions mean connection speeds will improve in-line with the national average over time, or will connection speed performance remain the same throughout the course of the contract?
- **Failures/compensation:** What happens if something goes wrong? What will the turnaround time be if there is a connection problem or there is damage to a broadband line? How many hours or days will be required to fix the issue if your connectivity supplier has to work with BT Openreach because the underground broadband wires belong to them? Is there a process for claiming compensation for outage impacts?
- **Installation and coordination with EPS:** What are the arrangements for setting up your connection? Will the connection setup be co-ordinated with the pharmacy system configurations necessary to enable EPS?
- **Extra benefits:** Are there added benefits alongside your main HSCN connection? For example:

- security/protective software/processes which protect your data and systems;
 - internet telephone options to replace or sit alongside the typical landline option;
 - a line of non-HSCN broadband for online usage not involving sensitive data transmission;
 - use of mobile devices within the pharmacy connected to HSCN;
 - back-up 3G/4G or dual connection to protect business continuity if the local connection is lost;
 - wide area network (WAN) – i.e. a shared connection across multiple pharmacy branches; and
 - alternative authentication options instead of Smartcard, e.g. key fob, or multi-factor authorisation.
- **Compatibility with pharmacy system:** Will the connection be compatible with your pharmacy system?
 - **Contract length:** How long will the connection contract last? Can any existing contracts for the Patient Medical Record system, hardware, support, software and connection be synchronised to end in-line with each other?
 - **Contract flexibility:** Is the contract flexible e.g. enabling speed boosting without new surcharges?
 - **Transparency of offering:** Is the offering published and clear to you allowing you to compare offerings?

Frequently asked questions

Q. Will my ability to deliver services and use my systems be disrupted by any ongoing HSCN transitions?

Adverse impact on service provision is not expected as the HSCN develops. If you or your pharmacy system supplier change the connection in the future (for speed, capability or cost improvements), then there may be some planned configuration adjustments, and a new router might be provided for use by the pharmacy. Community Pharmacy England has highlighted to NHSE's TD that planned remote maintenance relating to changing commercial arrangements, should take place at non-busy times e.g. in the middle of the night and away from month-end.

Q. What impact does the HSCN transition have on overall connection costs?



NHSE's TD say they anticipate that over time, like-for-like HSCN connectivity should become cheaper. In the global commercial broadband market, the price for like-for-like connections has decreased over time. The UN's report '*State of Broadband*' highlighted that within 20 years, things were done 100x faster at the same price within the domestic broadband market. Pharmacy teams may use free online speed test tools (e.g. [Which? test](#)) to assess their speed and weigh up offerings when they are selecting between pharmacy system and connectivity offerings.

Q. Will the move to the HSCN involve new minimum standards for availability/speed?

NHSE's TD set out minimum standards within the [HSCN supplier obligations document](#). E.g. HSCN suppliers provide services which offer minimum 99.95% availability. A HSCN services offering table, if publicised, may provide the 'menu' of speed options being used. Such standards apply only to those receiving HSCN connectivity directly, e.g. an aggregator using a HSCN supplier, should be receiving the promised level of service.

Q. Are there any options to improve my connection speed?

One expectation is for pharmacy owners to have an extra 'normal' broadband line for internet use which does not involve transfer of sensitive patient data. HSCN connection is intended for sensitive (not all) internet traffic.

Q. Will I always require HSCN connection?

[NHSE's TD have an Internet First policy](#) which seeks to lessen requirement for HSCN where suitably secure connectivity can be arranged without HSCN requirement, and the Care Identity Service (CIS) 2 programme developments and other developments are anticipated to gradually lessen the need for HSCN connections over time, and as IT suppliers establish appropriate connectivity options.

Further information

Read more at: cpe.org.uk/hscn; cpe.org.uk/connections; cpe.org.uk/routers; and cpe.org.uk/cybersecurity.

If you have any queries or require more information, please contact: it@cpe.org.uk