# SMS Optimisation

## Best Practice: A Quick Guide

**May 2025**

**V1.8**

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# Contents

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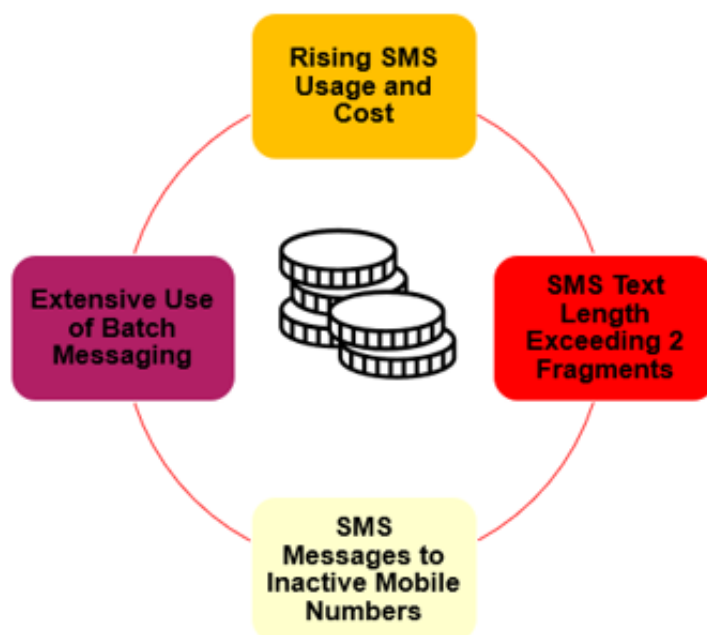and wellbeing for all...**

# 1. Background

Currently NENC ICB fund the cost of any SMS (Short Message Service) messages – also known as text messaging – sent from your practice to your patients via BT, AccuRx, iPlato or MJog.

During 2024/25 the cost to the NHS was circa **£2 million across the North East and North Cumbria area for SMS messages.** As the ICB does not receive a national allocation to support SMS, we need to adopt better ways of working i.e., the use of free digital channels. A good example of this is the messaging capability of the NHS App or sending messages via email.

As SMS messaging is a highly efficient method to communicate with patients, the ICB would like to raise awareness with practices of the rising costs of SMS messaging, and in doing so, enable practices to stay connected with their patients in a more cost-effective way. This best practice guide is designed to provide information to help you understand how SMS messages are charged, and to provide simple and practical tips that all practices can do to help reduce unnecessary costs.

**Note: This guide is not definitive, and will be updated to include additional content, as and when required.**

## Did you know that the NENC ICB current annual SMS cost is £2 million?



Rising SMS Usage and Cost

SMS Text Length Exceeding 2 Fragments

SMS Messages to Inactive Mobile Numbers

Extensive Use of Batch Messaging

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# 2. What is an SMS Fragment?

When an SMS is sent via BT, Accurx, iPlato or MJog, although it appears as one message to the user and the patient, it is split into chunks of around **160 characters**, each called fragments.

Each SMS message sent is charged by the number of fragments it contains.  A fragment is made up of a number of characters, which includes spaces and special characters.  The more characters you use, the more SMS fragments are contained within the message, thus increasing the costs.

The table below shows the character counts for each fragment bracket:

| Number of Fragments | Character Count |
|---|---|
| 1 | 0 - 160 |
| 2 | 161 - 306 |
| 3 | 307 - 459 |
| 4 | 460 - 612 |

For example, a message containing 161 characters is 2 fragments.  By reducing the message size by 1 character will make the message only 1 fragment, halving the cost.

SMS characters include letters; numbers; symbols; special characters; punctuation; and spaces.  Furthermore, some special characters and spacing count as multiple characters:

| Character / Spacing | Character Count |
|---|---|
| [ ] { } ^ \ \| ~ € | Each of these symbols count as 2 characters |
| Ä É Ö Ü à ä é è ì ò ö ù ü | Unicode characters significantly reduce the maximum character count per fragment - 1 fragment is 70 characters rather than 160. |
| Using 'Enter' / ⏎ | Using Enter/Return to use line spacing in a message counts as 2 characters |

If your existing SMS system does not include a character counter, please use an SMS character counter **before** sending your SMS message http://smscharactercount.com/#/counter

The patient greeting and name (e.g. Dear Mrs Smith) plus the practice name and staff member name at the end of the message, which are included as default, are included in your message and character count.  When composing messages, the number of fragments that the message comprises may not be shown, only the number of characters.  Please consider this and the fragment thresholds above.

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The character counts are shown in Accurx and iPlato messages, as shown below:

**Accurx:**



Character count is 48

This shows that even without the full message 48 characters have been used of a maximum of 612 (including patient greeting and practice signature).

Remember though that 612 characters is 4 fragments!

**iPlato:**



Character count is 0.

This shows that no characters have been used so far, however the message has no patient greeting or practice signature.

The maximum available parts/fragments is 3 - 459 characters!

Remember that merge fields will increase your character count, as will the surgery details (i.e. practice signature).

It is important to be particularly mindful of message sizes / character counts when sending batch messages, as this can result in a significant number of potentially unnecessary fragments being sent and excessive costs.

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# 3. Fragment Costs

Unlike personal mobile contracts, where unlimited SMS can be included, the NHS SMS charges are payable by NENC ICB per fragment. The longer the message, the more fragments and therefore the more expensive the message is. NENC ICB are also charged for failed messages, so if the patient mobile number is incorrect, there is still a charge incurred.

**SMS costs are currently calculated at 2.64p (£0.0264) per fragment including VAT**, therefore the importance for practices is to focus on reducing the number of **unnecessary** fragments.

Example 1 - A small practice of 2,500 patients sending a batch message to all patients would cost the following, depending on the number of fragments the message includes:

| Message Fragment Count | Fragment Cost | Total SMS Cost |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| 1 | £0.0264 | £66 |
| 2 | £0.0528 | £132 |
| 3 | £0.0792 | £198 |
| 4 | £0.1056 | £264 |

Example 2 - A large practice of 23,500 patients sending a batch message to all patients would cost the following, depending on the number of fragments the message includes:
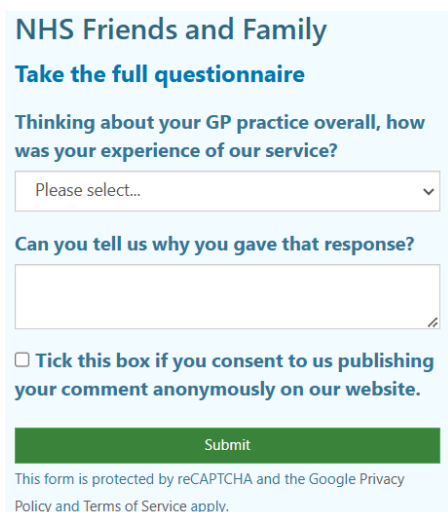
| Message Fragment Count | Fragment Cost | Total SMS Cost |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| 1 | £0.0264 | £620 |
| 2 | £0.0528 | £1240 |
| 3 | £0.0792 | £1861 |
| 4 | £0.1056 | £2481 |

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# 4. Appropriate Use of SMS Messaging

Using SMS to communicate with patients is encouraged, however there are some scenarios where it may not be appropriate.

The following are some **appropriate uses** of SMS messages to patients, for practices to consider:

- **Appointment reminders**.

- **Administration information** e.g. prescription ready to collect.

- **Recall** e.g. Chronic Disease annual review, advising patient to book an appointment.

- **Care plan** sent during a consultation, e.g. dosing of new medication.

- **Advice and safety netting** sent during a consultation, e.g. link to NHS Choices or MSK exercise videos.

- **Signposting to third-party services or self-help advice**\* (\*with patient prior consent) e.g. Physio, GetUBetter or Sound Doctor.

- **Vaccination campaigns**, e.g. Flu, Covid and RSV vaccines.

- Normal **test results**\* e.g. blood tests normal (\*with patient prior consent).

- **Reminders** e.g. for cervical screening or overdue blood tests.

- **Some abnormal blood results**\* e.g. Low Vitamin D with advice for sun exposure and over the counter supplement (\*with patient prior consent).

- **Telephone message information** e.g. we tried to call but could not reach you.

- **Friends and Family Test (FFT)** however these should be limited to 250 per month. The FFT can be added to the practice website for patients to complete, example below. FFT can also be collected via a post box within the practice. This will ensure all patients have an opportunity to participate.

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The following are **inappropriate uses** SMS messages to patients:

- **Worrying, complex or sensitive test results** e.g. STI test, High PSA or pregnancy confirmation.

- **Long or complex messages** e.g. multiple medication changes, or diagnoses from a consultation.

- **Links to sensitive patient advice without patient consent** e.g. family planning advice, STD clinic advice.

- **Urgent administration requests without follow-up** e.g. urgent appointment required.

- **Surgery information** e.g. we have a Facebook page, Dr x is retiring.

- **Messages not directly related to patient care**.

# 5. Requests to Send SMS Messages from NHS Organisations

As part of the SMS optimisation project, it was identified that some practices are being requested to send out suggested SMS messages to their patients as part of external health campaigns, wellbeing initiatives etc. As all SMS messages incur a cost to the NHS, these requests should be reviewed and approved by NENC ICB prior to being sent.

Therefore, if your practice has been asked to send out specific SMS messages from any NHS organisation, including hospital trusts, PCNs, ICB Place based teams, could you please ask that they send their request to the Primary Care Digital Support Hub or forward their details to necsu.pcdsh@nhs.net

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# 6. Hints and Tips

The following good practice hints and tips may help you to be more efficient and keep SMS fragment usage to a manageable level:

- *Check patient mobile numbers (at every encounter with the practice) and update accordingly. This will ensure SMS messages successfully reach patients as intended and help reduce costs as failed messages are chargeable.*

- *Review practice templates and, where possible, make them short, clear and succinct - ideally under 160 characters (1 fragment) or 306 characters (2 fragments) where possible.*

- *All batch messages sent via Accurx, iPlato and MJog will now go via the NHS App as the first attempt at sending the message, which is free. If the notification isn't viewed within 24 hours this will be sent via SMS instead - Encourage patients to sign up to the NHS App and enable notifications (the NECS Primary Care Digital Support hub can help you with this; contact details on page 9).*

- *Remember batch messages sent directly via TPP SystmOne or EMIS Web will not go via the NHS App, therefore will automatically be chargeable. Use Accurx, iPlato or MJog, where possible, for batch messages in order to benefit from free NHS App notifications (as outlined above).*

- *Don't copy and paste from MS Word into your communication portal without checking the character count (306 characters or less where possible).*

- *Shorten URL links included in messages using an online URL shortener, e.g. Bitly or Tiny URL.*

- *Review your appointment reminders schedule, length of message and how often.*

- *Batch messages – consider other ways to inform patients you are closed for training, like social media, posters, telephone messages, website etc.*

- *Consider using 'Send as email' – this can be the preferred channel of communication for some patients (e.g., for Fit Notes) - it's free.*

- *Consider whether appointment invitation messages to patients in residential / nursing homes is appropriate.*

- *Ensure that all staff are aware of the fragment thresholds and for them to be mindful of these when compiling and sending ad-hoc messages.*

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# 7. Additional Resources

➢ NENC ICB SMS checklist for practice staff.



20250417-SMS
Checklist-(526595A)-v

➢ NENC ICB GP TeamNet SMS Optimisation – Use of SMS for direct patient messaging

➢ SMS costs: What is a fragment? | Accurx Help Centre

➢ SMS costs: How to be more fragment efficient | Accurx Help Centre

➢ NHS App messaging service - NHS England Digital

➢ NHS England Messaging Channels for General Practice.



NHSE Messaging
Channels for General

➢ NHS England SMS Usage Toolkit



NHSE SMS Usage
Toolkit-June 2024.ppt

# 8. SMS Optimisation Support

**Practices within NENC (excluding North Cumbria)**

If you would like to arrange any support in relation to SMS optimisation or the NHS App, please get in touch with the NECS Primary Care Digital Support Hub team via necsu.pcdsh@nhs.net

**Practices within North Cumbria**

For any support in relation to SMS optimisation or the NHS App, please contact the PRIMIS team via primis@ncic.nhs.uk



We're not asking you to...

... Stop using SMS

We are asking that you...

... adopt some useful practices that will make the most of available resources

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