


# Improving referral processes and efficiency

Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust



The Pennine Acute Hospitals   
NHS Trust

**Choose and Book has helped the Pennine local health community to achieve operational benefits and to improve service delivery and patient care.**

**This case study highlights how Choose and Book has saved the Trust approximately 100 hours per week across the Health Records department by storing referrals electronically.**

**The case study also demonstrates how Choose and Book helped to significantly improve the Trust's referral process and response times as well as reducing the Trust's Did Not Attend (DNA) rates.**

## Background

A Benefits Realisation Review was undertaken to provide evidence of the benefits the Trust had achieved as a result of the implementation of Choose and Book. The review was conducted between June and October of 2007.

## The Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust

The Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust (PAHT) was formed in 2002 as part of a merger of four local Acute Trusts to provide healthcare to the local population of 850,000. The PAHT area covers the north east of greater Manchester which is



*The Royal Oldham Hospital, Oldham, Manchester*

also served by four PCTs. PAHT receives in excess of 145,000 referrals annually into general and specialist services from across North West England. During 2007, the Trust successfully processed over 79,000 appointments via Choose and Book and over the past two years they have consistently been one of the highest performing Trusts in England.

## How PAHT worked prior to Choose and Book

Prior to Choose and Book, PAHT operated four separate booking offices across the organisation, in line with the national thirteen week wait target for outpatients.

The philosophy of the Trust is to treat patients in line with clinical priority. The introduction of

Choose and Book was one of a number of initiatives designed to improve patient access and allowed the Trust to offer patients a choice of date and time for their first outpatient appointment. Choose and Book is now fundamentally part of PAHT's approach to successfully deliver the 18 Week Referral To Treatment (RTT) pathway.

## Using research to understand the benefits being realised by Choose and Book

The Trust agreed to take part in a pioneering research project which explored and quantified the benefits that Choose and Book was bringing to patients and the Local Health Community (LHC).

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## Support for Choose and Book

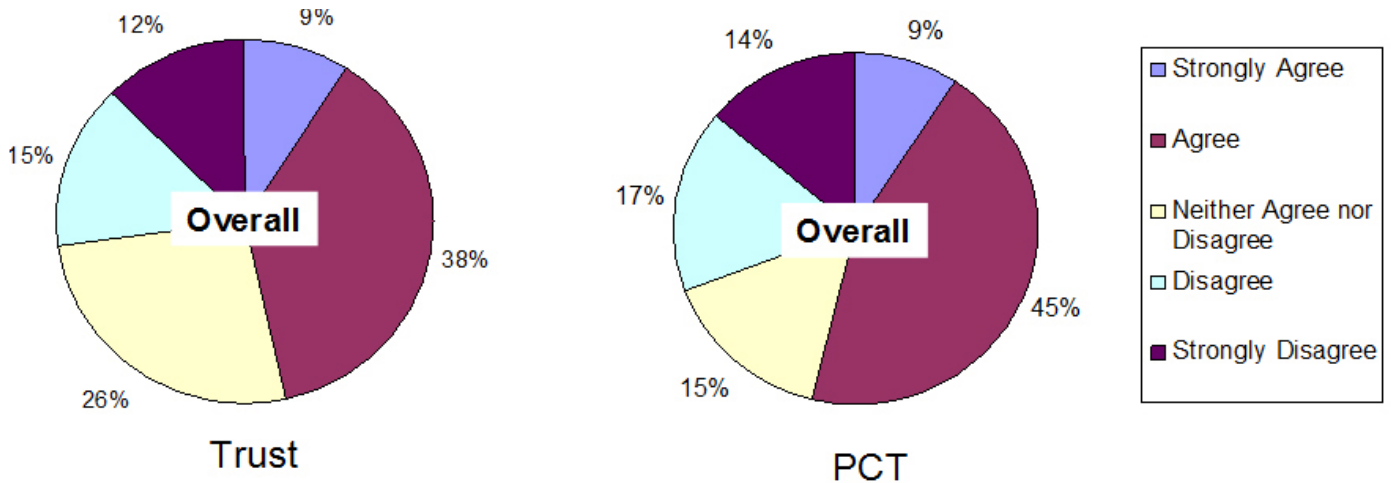


Figure 1

### The key objectives of the research were:

- To illustrate the end-to-end process changes involved in the LHC's implementation of Choose and Book. Changes included the creation and management of the Directory of Services (DoS) and maintaining dual paper and electronic referral processes.
- To illustrate the tangible benefits resulting from the process changes.
- To understand current perceptions of Choose and Book.
- To capture evidence of the benefits to stakeholders that are enabled by Choose and Book.
- To record lessons learned for future improvements.

### Increased support from Trust staff

There is encouraging support for Choose and Book within the Pennine LHC. The online survey conducted with the PCTs and the Trust found that approximately half of the respondents agreed, or strongly agreed, that Choose and Book was a worthwhile initiative.

### Operational and service benefits

Efficiencies have been gained by the electronic storage of referrals booked via Choose and Book. Referral letters are stored in Choose and Book until after the appointment time therefore removing the requirement for the storage and retrieval of referral letters from across the hospital's four sites. It is estimated that this has saved approximately 100 hours per week across the Health Records department.

### Improving referral response times

The Trust has also managed to reduce the amount of time it takes to respond to a referral request via Choose and Book compared with the paper

referral route. Clinicians can now review referrals online, allowing them to look at a referral letter once it is attached by the GP surgery and the patient has booked an appointment. This eliminates the time spent waiting for the paper referrals to be processed and hand delivered to the consultants' offices. Figure 2 illustrates the average time taken for the PAHT to either accept or reject a requested referral. After the introduction of online clinician reviewing in January 2007, the time decreased dramatically.

*"There is now little or no paper work and referrals are sent to the appropriate consultant. We are getting more and more information from GPs in the referral so on the odd occasion when the referral is inappropriate we can advise and redirect where necessary."*

**Mr Hassan Sharif**  
Consultant Colorectal Surgeon, PAHT

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### Referral response time

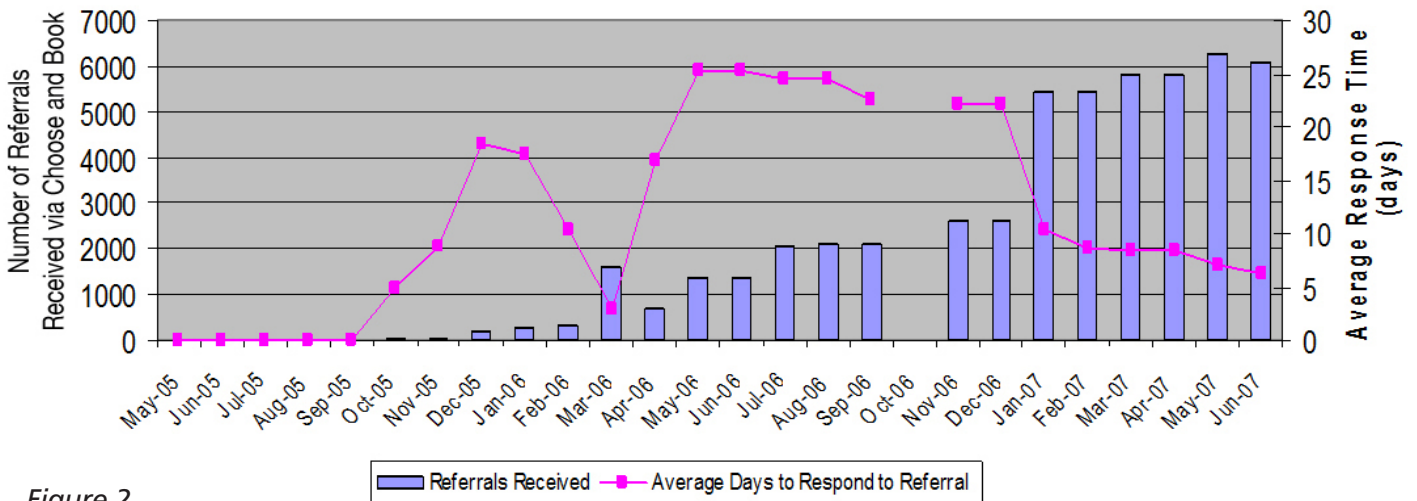


Figure 2

### Improving patient communication

Choose and Book allowed improved communication with patients via the automation of outpatient correspondence between Choose and Book and the Trust's Patient Administration System (PAS).

The automation of outpatient correspondence allowed letter generation automatically within Choose and Book, therefore removing manual intervention, which could have been delayed due to available resources. Previously correspondence was generated once the Trust received the referral and was reviewed by the clinician. This would have been considerably nearer to the outpatient appointment and therefore not providing patients with sufficient warning in terms of length of appointment type.

Automated correspondence also allows the creation of clinic correspondence and the ability to highlight the specific needs of that clinic, rather than generic content.

### Improving patient access

The standard approach to outpatient scheduling has led to the re-organisation of outpatient booking teams to create one administrative centre, PAHT's Contact Centre for all outpatients enquires, therefore increasing patient access.

Due to having one contact centre the available resources are now used much more effectively. PAHT's offices are open between 8:00am and 8.00pm Monday to Friday and 9:00am to 1.00pm on Saturdays.

Prior to this the Trust's offices were open during standard business hours. Detailed customer care training is now provided by a dedicated Training and Development Officer.

### Administration efficiency

Once the Trust achieved a 50 per cent utilisation rate in Choose and Book, it improved the efficiency of administration support it required as part of the Trust's outpatient booking reorganisation.

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### Annual cost for administration and clerical outpatient booking

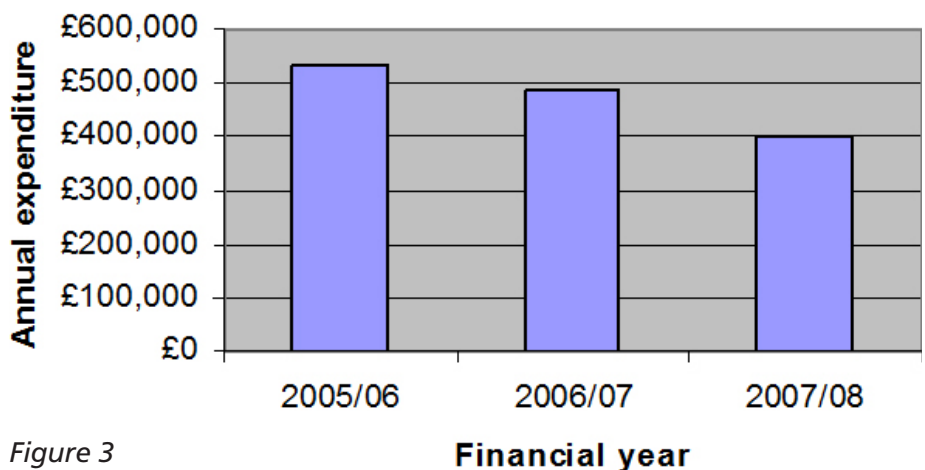


Figure 3

## DNA rates - Choose and Book versus all referrals

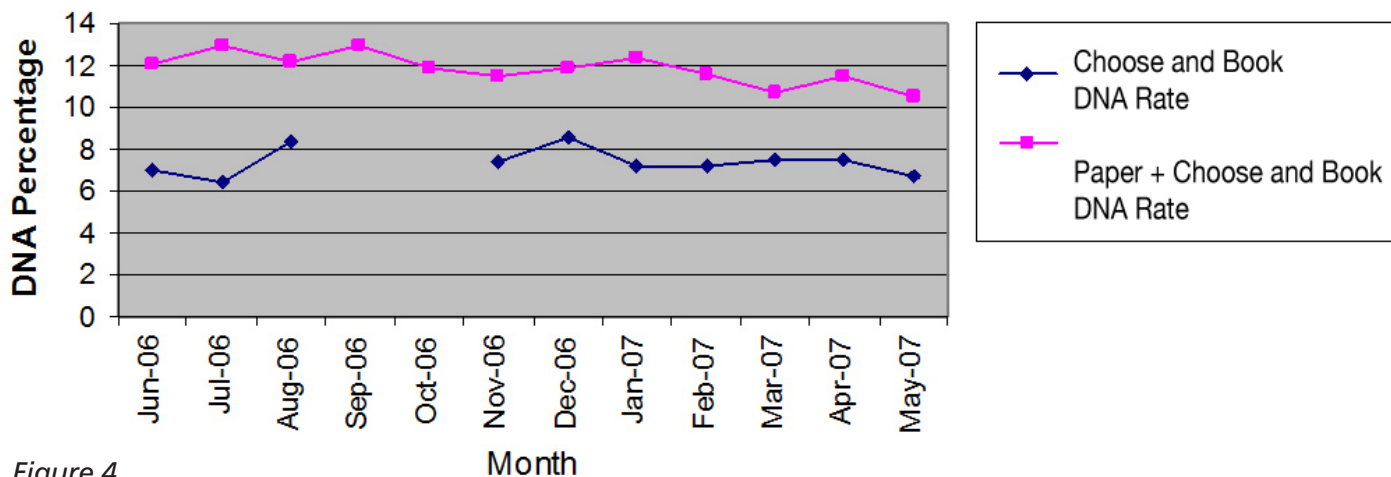


Figure 4

### Improving referral processing

Choose and Book has helped the LHC to improve the manner in which referrals are processed and services are delivered. Choose and Book now allows a standard and consistent way to schedule outpatient appointments.

An automated letter is sent to the patient once an appointment is booked. This provides the patient with certainty regarding their booking soon after an appointment is made.

Choose and Book enabled improvements in the delivery of services are also evident in the reduced Did Not Attend (DNA) rate associated with Choose and Book referrals as compared to all referrals (including paper-based referrals). On average, between June 2006 and May 2007, the DNA rate for Choose and Book referrals was 4.3 per cent less.

### Conclusion

Undertaking the benefits realisation research for Choose and Book was a worthwhile initiative for the LHC and allowed both primary and secondary care to look back at lessons learned for future Choose and Book implementation.

It was clear, following the project, that there was a need to have clearly joined up working between primary and secondary care. This has proved successful in improving the patient pathway from referral to treatment.

In addition, robust clinical engagement and communication between GPs and consultants was shown to be critical in ensuring that maximum utilisation of the system took place.

*“One of the main advantages of Choose and Book is that things can be done ‘live’. If there is a piece of information missing from a referral, or I would like to see a scan, I can just pick up the phone or email someone and they can send it through immediately. This has increased consultant/ GP communication no end.*

*The initial worry was that Choose and Book would reduce communications but the result is the opposite. Communication with GPs has increased and become more efficient and I am now talking to GPs that previously I had not spoken to.”*

**Matthew Hadfield**  
Vascular Surgeon and Clinical Director of General Surgery PAHT

NHS Connecting for Health is supporting the NHS to introduce new computer systems and services such as Choose and Book. These will help the NHS to deliver better, safer care for patients. For more information about this, visit our website [www.connectingforhealth.nhs.uk](http://www.connectingforhealth.nhs.uk)