



ASCENTI

# Unlocking physio-supported self-management through digital advancement

Clinically effective, cost-efficient, personalised and preventative care

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## Introduction and background

### Prevalence of MSK conditions

The number of people suffering from musculoskeletal (MSK) issues has escalated dramatically over recent years, with 20.3m<sup>1</sup> people now living with one of the more than 200<sup>2</sup> known MSK conditions.

There are thought to be multiple reasons for the surging number of cases in the UK. The rise in working from home, increased time spent being sedentary and an ageing population are all possible factors, while the longer waiting times for treatment further exacerbate problems.

It is estimated that almost one in five people (18.6%) have a long-term MSK problem<sup>3</sup>. In fact, there are now more years lived with MSK disabilities such as neck, lower back pain and arthritis than any other long-term condition<sup>4</sup>.

### Impacts on businesses

It's not just people's health that's suffering when it comes to MSK injuries. MSK conditions are having a serious impact on the economy, with 8.9 million working days lost to them in 2019/20 - an increase of almost a third on the previous year<sup>5</sup>.

Latest figures from the Health and Safety Executive<sup>6</sup> (HSE) show that MSK issues account for 28% of all work-related ill health.

Previous research by Ascenti<sup>7</sup> revealed that one in two people (49%) were experiencing more physical pain since they started working from home, and recent data from the Office for National Statistics<sup>8</sup> (ONS) suggests that the number of home workers has risen from 27% to 37% over the last two years.

### The lasting impact of Covid-19

As well as the likely impact of working from home on employees' MSK health, a significant proportion of patients (15.5%) who had the Covid-19 virus or were recovering from Covid-19 have reported MSK issues as a symptom<sup>9</sup>.

And, while the last pandemic lockdown ended on 19th July 2021, studies<sup>10</sup> showed that the measures necessary to keep us safe also reduced physical activity and increased sedentary activity levels. These are known risk factors for MSK injuries when people start to exercise again, and so the impacts of the lockdowns could still be being felt now.

## **The intolerable pressure on the NHS**

The rising number of MSK issues is putting huge pressure on the NHS, which is struggling as a result.

As of January 2022, NHS waiting lists currently stand at 6.1m<sup>11</sup>, the highest since records began<sup>12</sup> – with more people waiting for MSK treatments than any other form of care<sup>13</sup> and almost a third of all GP consultations being for MSK conditions<sup>14</sup>.

The latest available data was published in April 2019, when there were already 45-day waiting lists for physio treatments<sup>15</sup> and, given the extensive waiting lists now, it is likely that the situation is worse still today.

The government has ring-fenced an extra £1bn to tackle treatment backlogs, however, figures suggest that this is likely to fall significantly short of what is needed<sup>16</sup>.

## **How Private Medical Insurance (PMI) is plugging the gap**

Fortunately, businesses are helping to plug the gaps left by the health service, with more than a third of UK SMEs increasing their support for employees' physical and mental health<sup>17</sup>.

Employee demand for Business Health Insurance has increased 11.4%<sup>18</sup> and PMI is increasingly likely to be seen as a key part of the Employee Value Proposition.

In 2019, 29% of individual PMI customers purchased a policy due to concerns about NHS waiting times<sup>19</sup>. That number is perhaps likely to rise in the current circumstances, which could increase health inequalities<sup>20</sup>.

## **The rise of digital health tools**

In recent years there had already been an increase in the use of digital health tools and Covid-19 led to a further acceleration in the adoption of patient-facing technology, with 62% of patients reporting increased use<sup>21</sup>.

When patients experience symptoms that aren't concerning, the majority (60%) would prefer to communicate with a clinician using technology or the telephone<sup>22</sup>.

Digital health tools enable individuals to take a preventative approach to managing their health, accessing support at an early stage and avoiding the risk of a niggle developing into a serious injury.

## **Personalised care and digital health**

Personalised care is where people have more choice and control over how their care is planned and delivered. It's designed to empower patients with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to manage their own health more effectively.

Used correctly, clinically-led digital health tools can support the delivery of key components of personalised care, such as Shared Decision Making (SDM) and Supported Self Management (SSM). The Kings Fund states<sup>23</sup>: "Technology can improve access to information to enable better decisions about what will work for an individual and can enable individuals to have more control and knowledge about their health."

Pre-Covid-19, virtual physiotherapy services represented the minority of support offered by both the private and public physiotherapy sectors. However, the pandemic created a sudden need for digital services to be rolled out more widely across the industry.

Since then, virtual physiotherapy services have flourished and been embraced by patients, with recent research of 27,000 patients by Ascenti<sup>24</sup> - published on the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy's (CSP) Innovations Database<sup>25</sup> - demonstrating that they can be just as effective as in-person treatment.

With data<sup>26</sup> suggesting that 70% of MSK patients do not engage in prescribed exercise, this report will explore whether a clinician-led digital app that provides 24/7 access to education, support and advice leads to greater engagement, improved efficiencies and, most importantly, effective outcomes.

It is an important exploration since, as Sue Brown, the CEO of the Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance (ARMA), recently stated<sup>27</sup>: 'Musculoskeletal health is now more important than ever.'

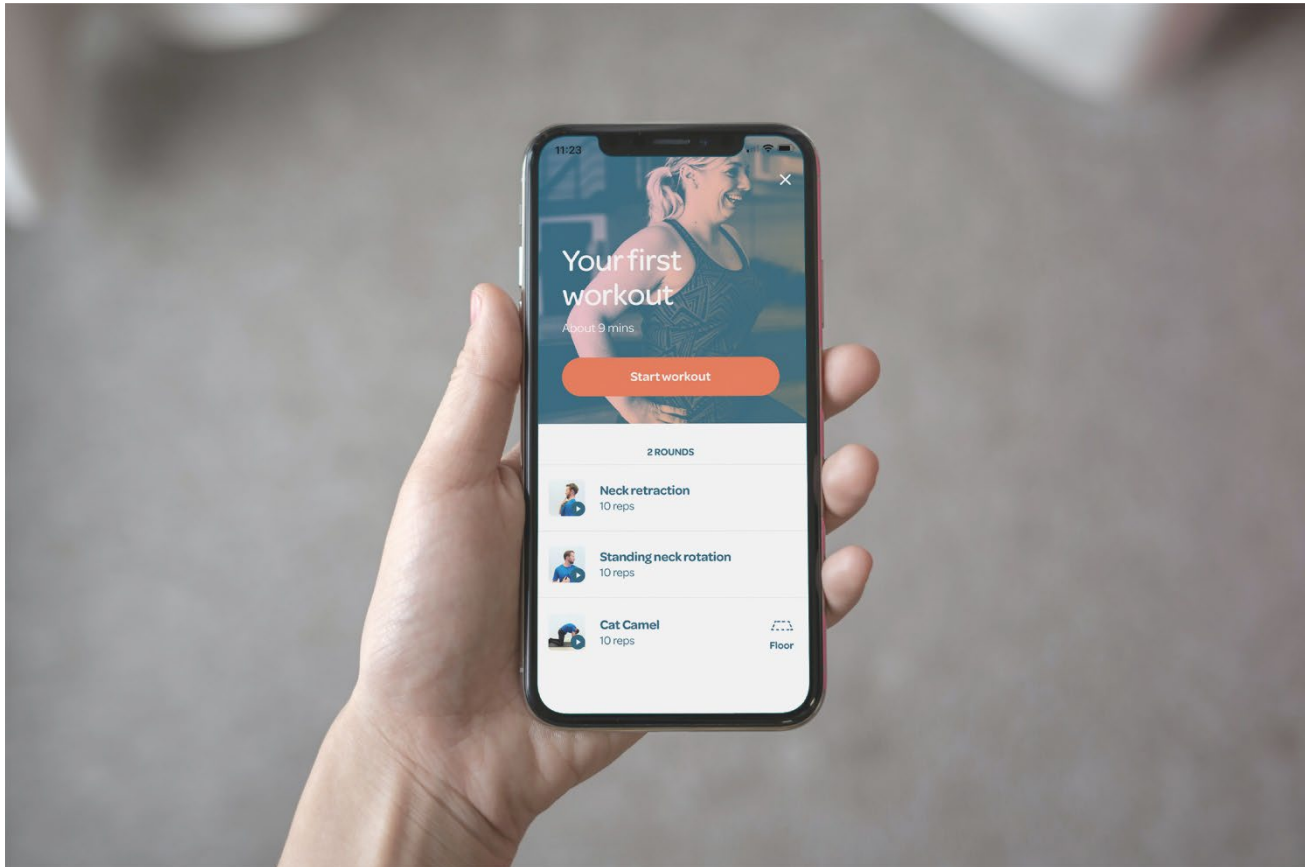
## **Background to the study**

### **Introducing Ascenti Reach, the first end-to-end clinically-led 'Supported Self Management' app**

Ascenti Reach is a new physio-led, app-based physiotherapy service created and owned by Ascenti, the UK's leading private physiotherapy company.

Developed over the last four years and now piloted by 12,000 patients, Ascenti Reach is the first physio app to provide an end-to-end hybrid solution, including digital triage, 24/7 access to online clinician support and the empowerment of self-management tools including videos and educational

articles. The app promotes healthy active behaviour and effective self-management, while also offering onward referral into Ascenti virtual consultations or face-to-face appointments at one of Ascenti's 300 nationwide clinics for patients that would benefit from manual therapy and other in-person treatment.



The technology has not been white labelled; it has been purpose-built from scratch by Ascenti's in-house digital team of highly-skilled developers, UX and UI experts, who have collaborated with Ascenti physiotherapists to ensure a high-quality experience. In addition, Ascenti's growing physiotherapy team, whether home-based or in-clinic, are all directly employed by the company. This end-to-end ownership ensures far greater control of quality, safety, efficiency and effectiveness.

While many health technology apps are designed to keep people out of care, Ascenti Reach has been built to identify the most appropriate, safe, motivating, and convenient treatment pathway for the individual at that time, with the goal of providing them with the tools they need to effectively manage their health.

### **How the app works**

The app is designed to efficiently move patients through three stages:

## 1. **Clinical triage**

Ascenti Reach uses a robust digital assessment and screening process based on validated questionnaires and patient reported outcome measures. It is informed by The International Federation of Orthopaedic Manipulative Physical Therapists' (IFOMPT) international framework on screening for red flags and potential serious pathologies<sup>28</sup> and by the NHS Serious Pathology Guide for Clinicians in Primary Care<sup>29</sup> and has been through a rigorous validation process with the experienced senior team at Ascenti. The assessment takes patients about six to eight minutes to complete, gathering information on their pain and condition and how it is affecting their day-to-day life.

## 2. **Analysis**

Clinician-devised algorithms then assess this data to identify the most safe and appropriate pathway for each patient. There are three assessment outcomes:

- a. In cases without any signs of serious pathology, a personal exercise plan is automatically created based on assessment responses.
- b. In cases where there are some indications of serious pathology, the physiotherapist reviewing the assessment will initiate a conversation with the patient via the Chat function in the app, and use the assessment answers and any follow up information to determine the most appropriate line of care.
  - i. If suitable for supported self-management the physio will manually create an exercise plan through Ascenti Reach.
  - ii. If the physio feels the patient should see a clinician, they can be referred into a virtual appointment or in-person appointment at one of Ascenti's 300 clinics nationwide.
- c. In cases where 'red flag' symptoms are detected, the patient is advised to seek urgent medical attention.

## 3. **Rehabilitation**

When the patient receives their personalised exercise programme, created or checked by an Ascenti physio, they then move forward into the rehabilitation phase.

Patients are provided with guided videos and instructions that demonstrate how to complete each exercise on their programme. The app format means they can simply place their smartphone or tablet in front of them and follow an entire exercise programme of video workouts, with a timer or counter indicating how long they should continue for.

At the end of each workout, patients receive a celebration icon and can give feedback on their exercises - helping their Ascenti physio to adjust and progress their exercise plans as required. They're also able to track their own progress using the app's visual graphs and tools and can set exercise reminders to motivate and help them to stick to their routines.

Patients can use the chat feature whenever they want to communicate with a physiotherapist for support and guidance. Physios check in periodically to ensure that patients in their care are happy with their progress.

The app also contains peer-reviewed educational material to help patients to understand their pain and condition and these are delivered at key points in their journey.

As part of Ascenti's dedication to providing patients with the safest and most appropriate level of care, the service has an escalation process where patients requiring additional support are offered a virtual appointment or onward referral to one of Ascenti's 300 clinics nationwide. This is available at any point in the patient's journey.



## The study

As a world-leading provider of virtual physiotherapy, with an award-winning digital service, Ascenti wanted to explore how its unique 'physio-supported self-management' app could be used to increase patient engagement, grow clinician capacity and, ultimately, deliver effective outcomes.

An observational study of 1,010 patients was conducted using data anonymously collected in the app as part of routine care. The patients involved were referred to Ascenti after experiencing neck, back or knee pain and their treatment journeys were mapped over a 12-week period. They joined the programme using Patient Access (part of EMIS Group), an NHS partnership service that connects patients to effective local health services when they need them online or via a mobile app.

This study was supplemented with an eight-question survey that was completed by 304 respondents within four weeks of discharge.

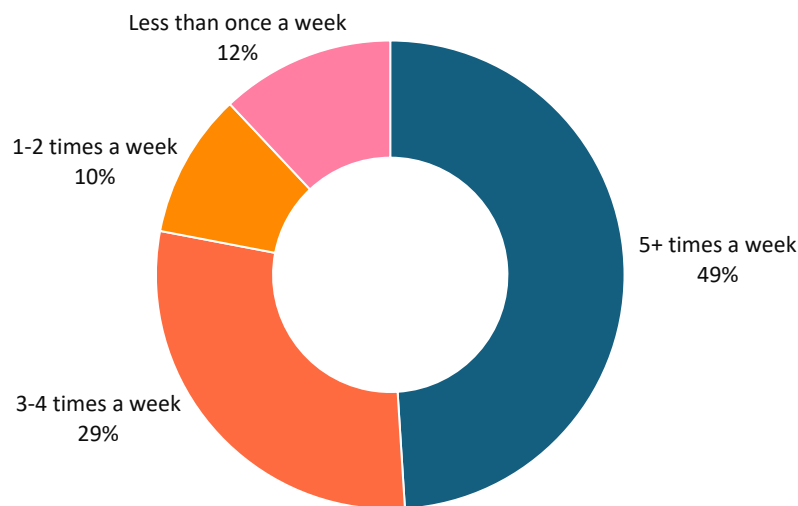
## Results

The study suggests that Ascenti Reach, the 'physio-supported self-management' app, delivered effective results in a number of key areas.

### Patient engagement

It has always been a significant challenge to get MSK patients to conduct prescribed home exercise through traditional methods, with research published in Spine Journal suggesting that up to 70% of patients do not adhere to prescribed home exercise<sup>30</sup>.

#### Patient usage (survey data)



The survey found that nearly half (49%) of the respondents used the app 5+ times per week, while a further 29% used it 3-4 times per week. Spot checks taken directly from the app exercise session tracking data at 4-weeks and 8-weeks suggest that this engagement is maintained over a relatively long period, with 62.9% of patients using it in week 4 and 53.5% using it in week 8.

### Clinical effectiveness

The Global Rating of Change (GROC) is a validated and well-recognised patient reported outcome measure. In this study it was applied to patients to describe their condition at the end of the treatment compared to when they first started on a scale running from -5 (indicating 'very much worse') and +5 (indicating 'very much improved'). An average improvement of 2.1 was found which is considered a clinically meaningful

2.1

average improvement on  
Global Rating of Change scale



improvement as it goes above the established minimal clinically important difference (MCID) of the GROCC scale of 2.0.

Pain was also measured on an 11-point Numerical Rating Scale (NRS), with scores taken at Initial Assessment (IA), and then at 4 weeks, 8 weeks and at discharge at 12 weeks.

Improvements were seen across the study population, with results showing that those people who used the app for the longest period saw the biggest impacts.

- Of the 406 people that used the app for 4 weeks, there was an improvement from 4.79 at Initial Assessment (IA) to 3.96 at discharge - an improvement of 0.84 NRS points
- Of the 236 that used the app for 8 weeks, there was an improvement from 4.72 at IA to 3.24 at discharge - 1.48 NRS points
- Of the 176 that used the app for 12 weeks, there was an improvement from 4.75 at IA to 3.01 at discharge - an improvement of 1.74 NRS points

### Convenient clinical access

The app offers direct 24/7 access to a qualified physiotherapist via a Chat service.

Over the 84-day period, users who completed at least one workout sent an average of 7.3 messages. It is interesting to note that while the *total* number of messages increased as people spent longer with the app and did more workouts, the *ratio* of messages per workout dropped significantly - from 1.5 messages per workout for people who had done at least five sessions, to 0.18 messages per workout for people who had done at least 100 sessions. This suggests that people needed less clinician support the more experienced and confident they became, which increases efficiency and is a key principle of personalised care and Supported Self Management.

7.3

average number of messages sent per user via Chat

Challenges such as taking time off from work and fitting in healthcare appointments around childcare responsibilities are known barriers to accessing healthcare services<sup>31</sup>. 39.7% of Chat messages sent by patients to clinicians were posted outside of the traditional office hours of 9am-5pm. This suggests that the intervention could lead to some people accessing healthcare support at an earlier stage, which could reduce the risk of further deterioration.

### Encouraging exercise

Regular movement is key to treating and preventing MSK conditions, and is an important part of an

overall healthy lifestyle.

The average number of exercise sessions across the 12 weeks (among patients who completed at least one exercise session) was a significant 33 - an average of 2.76 per week. Those users that engaged for the full 12 weeks completed an average of 69 workouts - 5.75 per week.

With Government and NHS guidelines for activity suggesting that adults should spread exercise evenly over 4-5 days each week<sup>32</sup>, or every day, and do strengthening activities that work all the major muscle groups, these results suggest that Ascenti Reach can make a significant contribution towards people meeting those targets.

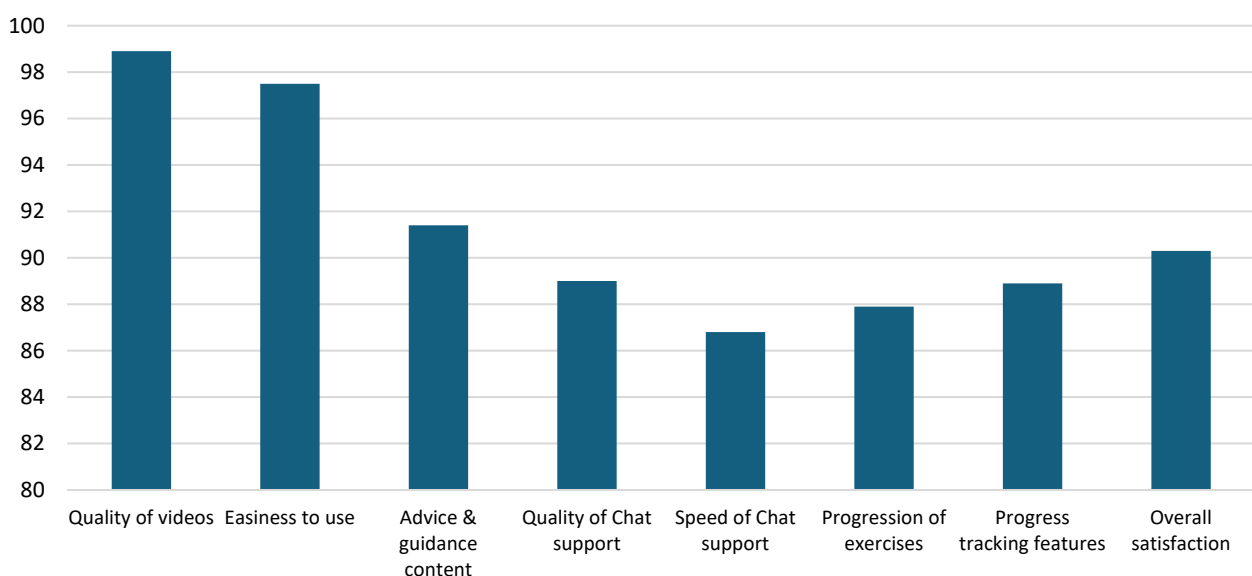
### Patient satisfaction

Patient satisfaction with the app was high across the board, particularly considering that the study was conducted while the service was still in the pilot stage.

On a scale of 0-4, where 0 is very satisfied and 4 is very dissatisfied, users scored 0.9 - between very satisfied and satisfied.

Patient satisfaction appeared to increase the longer they engaged with the app, rising from 87.2% at 4 weeks, to 91.5% at 8 weeks, to 93.6% at 12 weeks.

**Patient satisfaction with app features (%)**



In terms of features, when surveyed patients reported feeling satisfied with how easy to use the app was (97.5%), the quality of the videos (98.9%), the quality of the advice and guidance content (91.4%), the quality of the physio support in the Chat function (89.0%), the speed of this support

(86.8%) and the progress tracking feature (88.9%). The slightly lower satisfaction scores for Chat support and progress tracking have been identified as areas for improvement and highlighted the expectations patients have of these features.

86.2% of patients that used Ascenti Reach say they would actively recommend it to friends and family.

86.2%

would recommend Ascenti Reach to friends and family

### **Cost effectiveness**

While a physiotherapist providing in-person treatment might have the capacity to see around 40-50 patients each week, an Ascenti Reach physiotherapist can fulfil a much higher Active Capacity and therefore support more people to manage their own MSK health effectively.

In addition, the evidence suggests that people require less direct clinical contact the longer they engage with the app, which further increases efficiency. Coming at a time when NHS waiting lists for MSK injuries are at record levels, this service could help meet an important societal need in a cost-effective way.

### **Clinical safety**

During the course of the pilot a number of patients were identified as having a potentially more serious or specific pathological condition and they were appropriately recommended to face-to-face physiotherapy or to see their GP, demonstrating that this system is effective. It does not appear that there were any errors in the study, for example where a patient with more serious pathology such as a fracture, CES or cancer was not picked up in the screening process, and no safety incidents were reported.

### **Limitations**

The study is based on patients accessing physiotherapy treatment for a range of needs and so the results must be interpreted as general findings and it should not be assumed that they apply equally to all injury types - for example those involved in Road Traffic Accidents.

In addition, while the data captured demonstrated clinically meaningful results and positive scores in a range of areas, there may be benefit to designing future research to include a control group so more direct comparisons with in-person treatment can be made.

## Discussion

Against a backdrop of record NHS waiting lists, surging adoption of digital health tools and a cultural move towards a more empowering personalised care health system that equips people to manage their own health more effectively, it is the right time to explore the concept of end-to-end clinically-led 'physio-supported self-management'. An exploration of the potential advantages and disadvantages is below.

### Advantages

- Convenient - patients have full control of their treatment journey. They can access activity sessions and clinical support at a time that suits them. This increases the chances of them seeking out support at an earlier stage, since they don't need to organise time off work, engage childcare support or make travel arrangements. Early interventions can enable faster recovery and prevent further deterioration.
- Empowering - receiving manual therapy can be quite passive and patients often attend appointments with the intention of 'being treated'. With physio-supported self-management delivered through an app like Ascenti Reach, the onus is on the patient to take control of their own rehabilitation. It encourages accountability and digital tools like progress trackers and celebration icons can be very motivating. Self-management is consistently recommended across guidelines for painful MSK conditions and this app makes that process easier<sup>33</sup>.
- Reassuring – digital health tools like Ascenti Reach that enable regular clinical contact can be very reassuring for patients who may wish to check in that they are on the right track. Traditional in-person physio may inadvertently encourage patients to 'save up' questions for their next appointment and people may worry about whether they are doing exercises correctly. Direct 24/7 clinical access and digital tools such as exercise demonstration videos enable people to check in earlier and more frequently, potentially reducing any concerns.
- Appropriate referrals – digital triage based on validated questionnaires ensures patients are directed towards services that best meet their need, reducing the strain that inappropriate referrals can place on already stretched healthcare services. It reduces time wasted by clinicians and patients and increases cost-effectiveness and efficiency.
- New types of career - the emergence of innovative digital health tools like Ascenti Reach opens the door for new types of interesting careers for physiotherapists. Physiotherapists now have the opportunity to have flexible roles that combine digital innovation with in-person treatment, allowing them to help more people overall. They can be in-clinic one day and working from home the next, combining the development of digital support plans with

providing advice and manual therapy.

- Cost effectiveness. Introducing an innovative service line, for the right people and the right time - optimising referrals and creating more efficient care pathways.

## Challenges

- Digital inclusion - although we have seen an unparalleled surge in digital health adoption, a significant proportion of people don't have access to digital devices and some do not feel confident using digital tools. It is very important that digital health tools are offered only as part of a broader healthcare eco-system that also includes in-person treatment. This ensures that the right people get access to the right support at the right time. Ascenti's end-to-end service gives people choice, which includes supporting people who struggle with digital access by offering appointments at one of its 300 nationwide clinics.
- Reduced trust - while digital triage has been found to be effective, some patients may be more likely to trust a diagnosis that is given to them after a physical examination. This could be because they worry about their interpretation of certain questions and whether they are responding appropriately. It is vital that digital assessment and screening surveys are rigorous in their methodology. Clinician reviews, escalation procedures and regular clinician messaging can help alleviate any risk of error.
- Response times and patient expectations - throughout the course of the study period, in order to better understand patient expectations and help optimise the service, Ascenti experimented with higher and lower caseloads for its clinicians. As with any customer response service, there were busier and less busy times when it came to managing patient queries. Striking the right balance to ensure that there is enough capacity for clinicians to respond within an acceptable time period will help to ensure patients remain satisfied with the service and benefit from timely advice and support.

## Conclusions

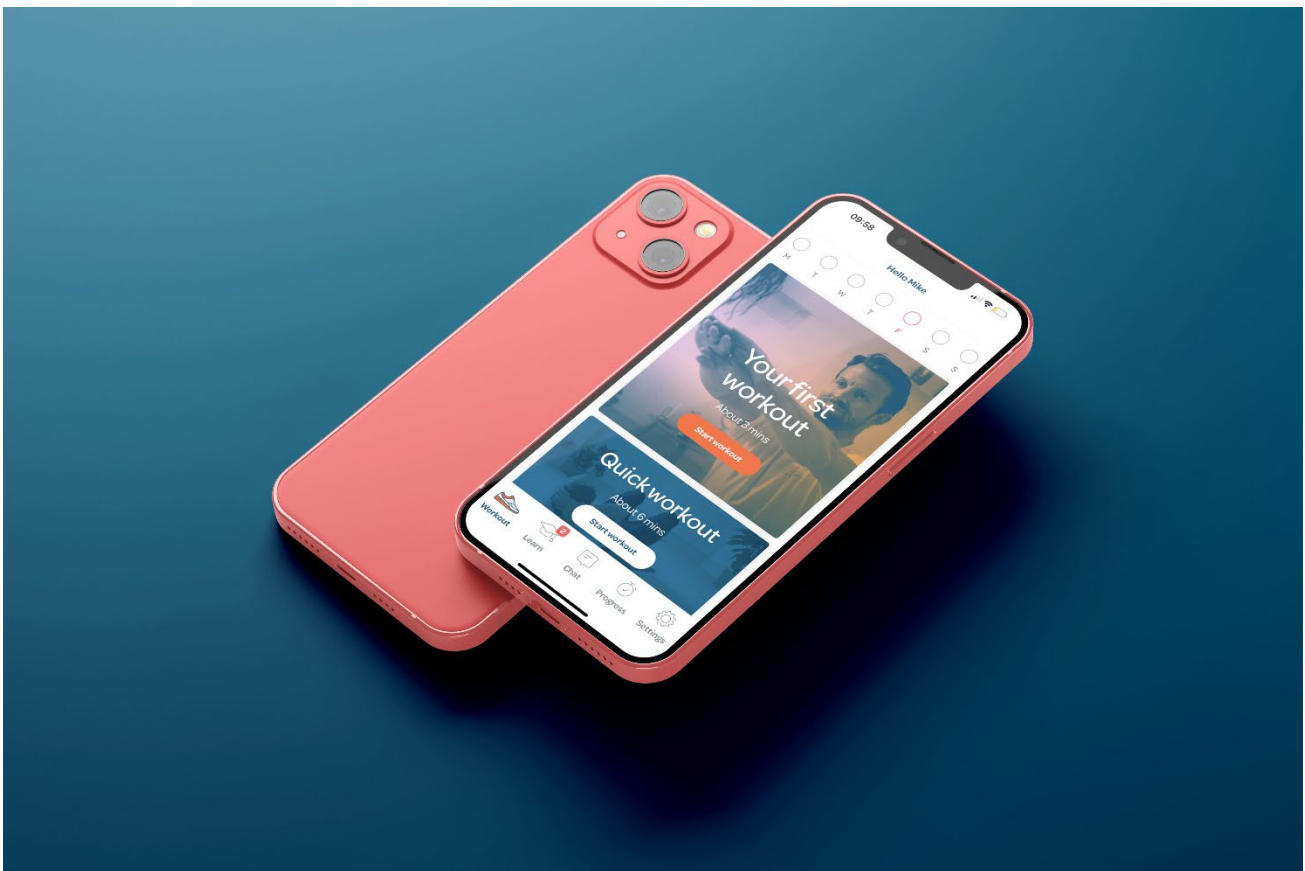
With MSK injuries contributing to record NHS waiting lists, increasing working days lost for businesses and pain and discomfort for individuals, it is clear that new solutions are needed to help people manage their own MSK health more effectively.

The NHS Long Term plan<sup>34</sup> committed to five practical changes, which included giving people more choice and control over their own health (personalised care) and more digitally-enabled care.

Clinically-led 'physio-supported self-management' provides a convenient, engaging, safe and

effective way for people to put their MSK health in their own hands. By increasing clinician capacity, it reduces the burden on the NHS and, by encouraging early engagement and a prevention-first approach, it has the potential to reduce the number of working days lost by businesses as a result of MSK issues.

The results of this study show that the end-to-end physio-supported self-management provided by the Ascenti Reach app is clinically safe and effective, achieves a high level of patient engagement and overcomes the problems of low commitment between appointments that often happens with in-person physio.



Key to the success of physio-supported self-management going forward will be the ability of healthcare providers to identify when to utilise it; providing the right treatment at the right time, to the right patient, through the right clinician.

It is for this reason that Ascenti has established the Ascenti Reach app not as a standalone tool, but as part of its award-winning clinical ecosystem. Different patients will respond best to different treatment options and their preferences may change over time and depending on their progress. Similarly, some clinicians will prefer and excel in digital first roles, while others will prioritise a flexible hybrid career.

Ultimately, it is about greater choice; greater choice for patients, clinicians and partners. Physio-

supported self-management will never replace in-clinic treatment, however, used effectively, as part of an end-to-end clinically-led system, it can improve the patient experience, augment clinician and patient outcomes, enhance professional standards and increase career opportunities, all while delivering clinically meaningful results. With the NHS burden so significant and the move towards personalised care already well underway, this report suggests that now is the time for physio-supported self-management to play a greater role in MSK treatment.

## **About Ascenti**

Ascenti is the leading independent provider of physiotherapy, mental health and selected clinical outsourcing services in the UK. They are a trusted partner to more than **20** NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and more than **400** private businesses across the UK, serving NHS patients, pay as you go customers and private medical insurance members.

With extensive national coverage, Ascenti has over **300** highly trained physiotherapists and healthcare professionals delivering upwards of **600,000** treatment sessions annually. Enabling people to make headway after illness and injury, step back in to work after accidents, or simply stay active and keep moving forward in their daily lives.

Ascenti is a dynamic and progressive company – advancing physical and mental therapies by making them more accessible to all, raising standards and pioneering new digitally enabled services. To learn more, visit [www.ascenti.co.uk](http://www.ascenti.co.uk).

## **Get in touch**

To request a demo, or to find out more about how Ascenti Reach could benefit you and your customers, please email [reachqueries@ascenti.co.uk](mailto:reachqueries@ascenti.co.uk).

## Case studies



Cathrine Vincent, age 35 from Nottingham

“I underwent spinal surgery in June 2020 and, following my operation, it was suggested to me that I try the Ascenti Reach app in order to aid my recovery, help with the pain I was experiencing and improve my overall core body strength. While I was a bit sceptical at first about not seeing a physio face-to-face, I was keen to try it.

“I immediately found that using the app helped to motivate and encourage me to exercise, as I could set exercise reminders and goals, and use a tick chart to keep a track of my progress. I was able to fit my personalised exercise programme around my schedule, which as a healthcare professional is handy, as my work is very busy and my shifts can vary.

“I really liked just how easy to follow and understand the exercise videos were - and it was great to be able to replay them to ensure I was practising each exercise correctly. The ability to chat with a physiotherapist, get timely feedback and discuss my progress was really helpful too. The chat option meant I could get support and advice from a professional physio whenever I needed it and I found this particularly useful to get answers to the less significant questions that, had I been an in-clinic patient, I simply wouldn't have bothered setting up an appointment to ask. As a medical professional myself, I was also very impressed by the education resources that patients have access to through the app - they were informative and did a great job of explaining related subjects such as how to manage pain and break cycles of inactivity.

“I've used the app for a little over six months now, averaging about four workouts a week, and it's fair to say it has delivered significant results and benefits for me. Before using Ascenti Reach, I couldn't sit through a two-hour meeting at work, the pain and discomfort from my back meant I had to stand up during it. Now, I can easily sit through these meetings. I also feel that my overall body strength and fitness has improved significantly, and I'm much better placed to manage flare-ups when my back pain is more severe than usual.”





Amanda McFadyen, age 52 from Merseyside

“As well as living with dyspraxia, a condition that affects my physical coordination, six years ago I was diagnosed as suffering from osteoarthritis, which causes my joints to become painful and stiff.

“As a result of both of these conditions, I knew I needed to build up my muscle strength to maintain and improve my movement. So when my doctor got in touch to ask if I’d be happy to be put forward to try the Ascenti Reach app, I jumped at the chance. This proved to be a great decision.

“I began using it every day for 19 minutes, with the aim of improving my flexibility and building my core muscle strength. The app is incredibly straightforward

and easy to use and there are so many helpful features to support you as you work your way through your personalised exercise programme. The videos that accompany the exercises are very useful and explain exactly how to do each exercise and the benefits it will deliver. I found these particularly helpful when it came to trying more complex exercises - and it was great that I could play them back until I was completely clear on what I needed to do.

“Because I don't have a 9-5 job, the ability to do my exercises at home, at a time that suits me, is brilliant. I won't go to the gym or elsewhere to exercise as I find it a bit embarrassing as a result of my dyspraxia - so being able to do my exercises from the comfort and privacy of my own home has really motivated me and made it a lot easier to stick to the programme.

“I've found the Chat function useful on a number of levels. I can get help and advice whenever I need it to ensure that I'm doing my exercises correctly. In addition, through the chat function, I've been able to report on my progress, with Ascenti's physios evolving and adapting my personalised exercise programme to ensure it's continuously working for me.

“Using Ascenti Reach has really helped me build my muscle strength. I feel a lot stronger and that's a big win for me. I am still using the app now and I am very happy with it. It's perfect for me and what I need, it couldn't be easier to use and it has made a real difference.”



James Court-Smith, age 49 from London

“I had been trying to increase my fitness, and during my workouts I noticed I was struggling with limited mobility in my right shoulder blade, which was becoming increasingly painful. I wanted to address the problem, but a face-to-face physio session didn’t seem ideal at the time due to the pandemic. Fortunately, the NHS pointed me in the direction of Ascenti Reach.

“After completing a short online assessment, I was provided with a personalised treatment plan, which had been created by one of Ascenti’s physios with my condition and requirements in mind.

“Initially, I was slightly nervous about doing the exercises incorrectly, but I needn’t have worried. The app provides easy to follow, guided videos and instructions for every exercise and these, combined with a Chat function that enabled me to get quick answers to any questions I had from an Ascenti physio, helped to build my confidence and really reassured me that I was performing the suggested exercises in the right way.

“After two weeks, I felt a noticeable improvement in my shoulder, and by week eight, my pain had completely disappeared. Once my shoulder issues had been effectively resolved, my exercise programme was adjusted by an Ascenti physio in line with my evolving needs and requirements. I moved on to strength building exercises for my shoulder and back, with exercises to help my core also introduced at my request. The ability to increase or decrease my exercise programme and change activity to suit my needs has been very helpful.

“The app has kept me really engaged and motivated to exercise. Since September 2021, I’ve used Ascenti Reach to exercise six days a week and, if it wasn’t for the daily reminders you’re able to schedule, I’m pretty sure I would have let things slide a little. It couldn’t be easier and more straightforward to use, and knowing that I can reach an Ascenti physio at any time to ask a question or seek encouragement is a big benefit. All in all, I would highly recommend Ascenti Reach to anyone.”

## Physiotherapist experiences



Mariana Sousa

MSK Physiotherapist, East Midlands

“Ascenti Reach is a very easy app to use, most people have smartphones and apps nowadays so it’s really accessible. There are lots of features that I really like, including being able to set reminders to complete exercises, but my favourite feature is the chat. Patients know that if they are struggling with something, they can easily contact us and can feel supported.

“I try to motivate my patients and build a good rapport with them, and I engage with them about their day-to-day lives like I would in clinic. I always try to be motivational and never want them to feel that they will get in trouble for not doing their exercises.

“I understand why physiotherapists who haven’t worked on a service like this might be sceptical about only having contact with patients through a chat function – I was too! I questioned how well it would work, which is why I wanted to be involved in the service and find out more about it. Even though I don’t see my patients, I can still help them – and that’s what physios want to do, support people to get them better.

“I really enjoy delivering the Ascenti Reach service. It’s a break from my usual working pattern – something I think other physios would enjoy too. I find it easy to work with and have quickly got used to helping patients virtually through the app, and am really happy when my patients tell me they are improving. Through Ascenti Reach I feel like I’m helping lots of people at the same time, it’s been good for my development and has pushed me as a clinician.

“I 100% believe that supported self-management can be a beneficial treatment approach. Some patients rely on their physio to ‘get them better’, when with the right support, they should be able to improve on their own. Through tools like Ascenti Reach, patients have confidence that they are doing their exercises correctly, and know that a physio is there to offer advice and steer them in the right direction.”



Jake Wilson  
MSK Physiotherapist, Central London

“I believe physio-supported self-management can be a really beneficial treatment approach. It’s something I’m in support for generally within healthcare, as well as physiotherapy, due to what we know from clinical research about how physios can best help patients through education and exercise prescription.

“It empowers patients and gives them more control over their own treatment, with support from us, and moves away from more traditional methods where people can become over-reliant on interventions that exist in face-to-face settings, such as manual therapies. It’s a modern approach towards what we know works best for a lot of people. In my mind it’s currently a really fruitful environment for these sorts of digitally-enabled services, with global changes following the COVID-19 outbreak and technical advancements generally.

“With traditional face-to-face physiotherapy treatment you have a session once a week, and that’s really all the contact you get. The Ascenti Reach messaging function allows you to have regular contact with the patient and provide other parts of the service outside of the exercise programme. For example asking clinical questions, signposting them to other services, providing additional information and pain management advice, and educating them about certain pathologies and symptoms to look out for. We can provide people with contact 9 to 5 Monday to Friday to make sure they are getting all the support they need. We can also reach a wider range of people – both geographically and across a diverse patient population with different MSK conditions.

“Ascenti Reach allows us to apply the skills we already have and develop them in new ways. It’s exciting because it’s a new and pioneering project – having been able to provide input and feedback during the development stage and contribute to the final product was a really good opportunity for my own development. There are lots of providers offering virtual physiotherapy following the pandemic, but the Ascenti Reach service is unique. It’s a completely different role from anything else we offer, and I enjoy the variety it gives me in my diary.

“In clinic we provide education, exercises, awareness and signposting to other services, and manual therapies. We can easily provide three out of those four things through Ascenti Reach. You miss out on the manual techniques which, though they can be beneficial, are not absolutely necessary within modern day provision of physiotherapy. We have lots of evidence that shows the level of improvement we’ve achieved in people, such as patient outcome stats, user feedback and satisfaction data – so we’ve shown that Ascenti Reach can effectively convert the face-to-face environment into a virtual setting and get similar if not better results.”



Disha Shah  
MSK Physiotherapist & Clinical Mentor, East  
Midlands

“I think supported self-management through an app is very beneficial. Patients feel much better when they take charge of their own improvement, and this leads to more compliance with their rehab programme. We want to empower patients to be able to self-manage, which is also helpful long-term if there is any relapse in symptoms.

“For me one of the main benefits of Ascenti Reach is that it provides immediate access to care, in a day and age where long waiting lists make it difficult to get healthcare treatment. There is a physio at hand that you can speak to every day if you want to. I think most patients find this the most advantageous part – it’s like having your own personal physiotherapist helping you through your process of recovery.

“One of my favourite features of the app is the exercise reminders, I think they are very important. Sometimes people can be wrapped up in their day-to-day activities, but when they receive reminders and positive messages, it really encourages them to complete their exercises.

“Treating patients through Ascenti Reach is different to traditional techniques as you don’t have 30-minute sessions per person. It’s easier to manage high volumes of patients – in an hour I can talk to 30 or 40 patients. I enjoy motivating people, changing their exercises and helping them to self-improve. I’ve had lots of feedback from patients and they are all really grateful when we are able to immediately answer their questions. We have patients using the chat function on a daily basis, even if they are travelling or overseas they still message us!

“Some physiotherapists may feel nervous about treating patients through an app without seeing them; the advice I’d give is to trust your clinical judgement. We are speaking to patients like we would in a face-to-face or video call appointment, it’s just a written conversation instead. If you ask good leading questions, if you are confident in your ability to provide the right treatment, if you’re good with your exercise prescription, then I don’t think that should be a problem. It’s all about understanding the individual patient you are treating and responding appropriately. And if you are ever concerned about a patient or believe they need further investigation, you can refer them to book an appointment.”

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[www.ascenti.co.uk](http://www.ascenti.co.uk)

 AscentiHealth

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 AscentiHealth

 Ascenti

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 AscentiHealth

T: 0330 678 0850

E: [contact@ascenti.co.uk](mailto:contact@ascenti.co.uk)

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