

Innovative Strategies for Expedited Detection of Axial Spondyloarthritis in Belfast

Joe Eddison, Clare Clark, Prof. Karl Gaffney, Jill Hamilton, Dr Neil Heron, Dr Thomas Ingram, Niamh Kennedy, Dr Adrian Pendleton, Prof. Raj Sengupta, Dr Dale Webb

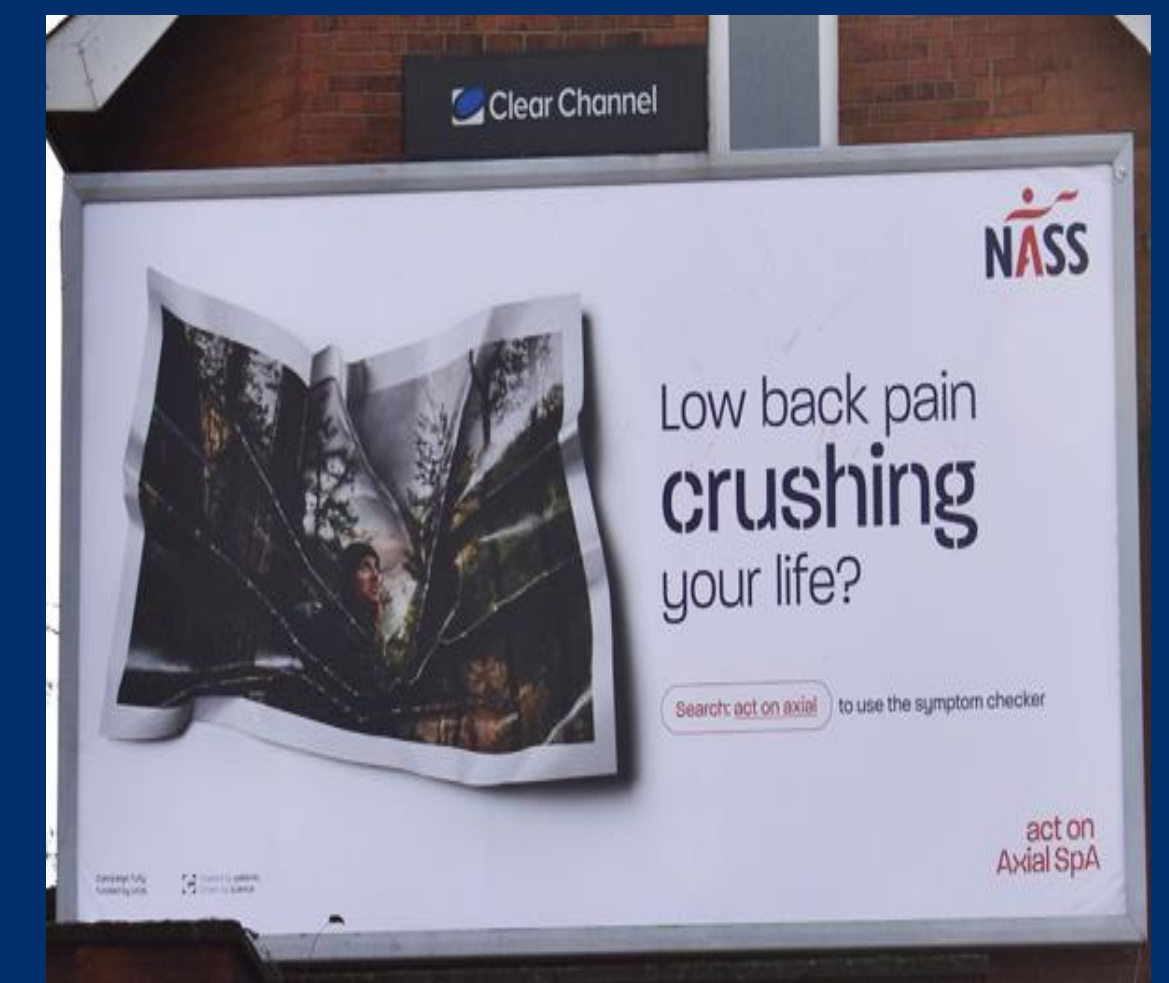
BACKGROUND

The *Act on Axial SpA* campaign is focussed on minimising the lengthy 8.5-year time to diagnosis for axial spondyloarthritis (axial SpA) by aiming for a pioneering Gold Standard diagnosis time of just one year. Collaborating with the Belfast Health & Social Care Trust, our initiative aims to streamline the patient journey from symptom onset to diagnosis through a comprehensive, integrated intervention package. By enhancing awareness of axial SpA and optimising diagnostic procedures alongside specialist care pathways, our pilot project endeavours to reduce the time to diagnosis, thereby serving as a blueprint for broader implementation across UK healthcare systems.

OBJECTIVES

1. To increase public awareness of axial SpA across Belfast
2. To utilise public awareness materials to reach and engage people in Belfast living with low back pain
3. To drive people living in Belfast with chronic low back pain to take the NASS symptom checker
4. To help people understand their back pain could be due to axial SpA and seek help from primary care
5. To help people start their journey to diagnosis and move through the pathway swiftly

8.5



METHODS

In partnership with a specialist Belfast-based creative agency, we devised a geo-targeted, multi-channel media campaign to bolster public awareness. The campaign featured 85 out-of-home advertising panels (such as bus stop, billboards, digital mall screens) across 85 locations, radio adverts on a local radio station, and geographically tailored social media adverts on Facebook and Instagram. Spanning six weeks during January and February 2024, we meticulously tracked the campaign's performance through standard social media and digital analytics platforms. The campaign was part of a wider project in Belfast that included the set up of a new clinic, new pathway and education programme for primary care professionals.

RESULTS

Our campaign resonated strongly with individuals experiencing low back pain, prompting them to take action by utilising the NASS symptom checker. Over the six-week period, our social media outreach amassed an impressive 995,399 impressions and reached 831,390 individuals. Out-of-home advertising achieved an 81% reach among 18–40-year-olds in Belfast, engaging over 88,000 individuals. Additionally, radio partnership adverts reached more than 565,000 adults across Northern Ireland. (See figure 2 below)

This extensive reach translated into robust engagement metrics:

- Social media ads garnered 16,799 clicks and 227,158 engagements.
- Radio advertising led to 2,390 readership engagements on Cool FM.
- The *Act on Axial SpA* website witnessed a surge in traffic, with 2,976 users from Belfast visiting during the campaign, compared to 285 in the entirety of 2023.
- Remarkably, the NASS symptom checker experienced a staggering 4,389% increase in average daily completions during the campaign. (See figure 1 below)

The campaign was seen by 831,000 people in Belfast, reaching 80% of our target audience. Almost 400 people completed the online symptom checker of whom 73% met the threshold for referral into rheumatology. In other words, it successfully educated people whose back pain had inflammatory characteristics.

This was supported by a primary care education programme which reached 90 GPs and physiotherapists in Belfast in its first phase, and the rheumatology department was able to create a new axial SpA clinic. Already, the average waiting time for a rheumatology appointment is down from 90 weeks to 8 weeks and 7 people have been diagnosed with axial SpA. We expect many more to be diagnosed early as the full effects of the campaign are realised.

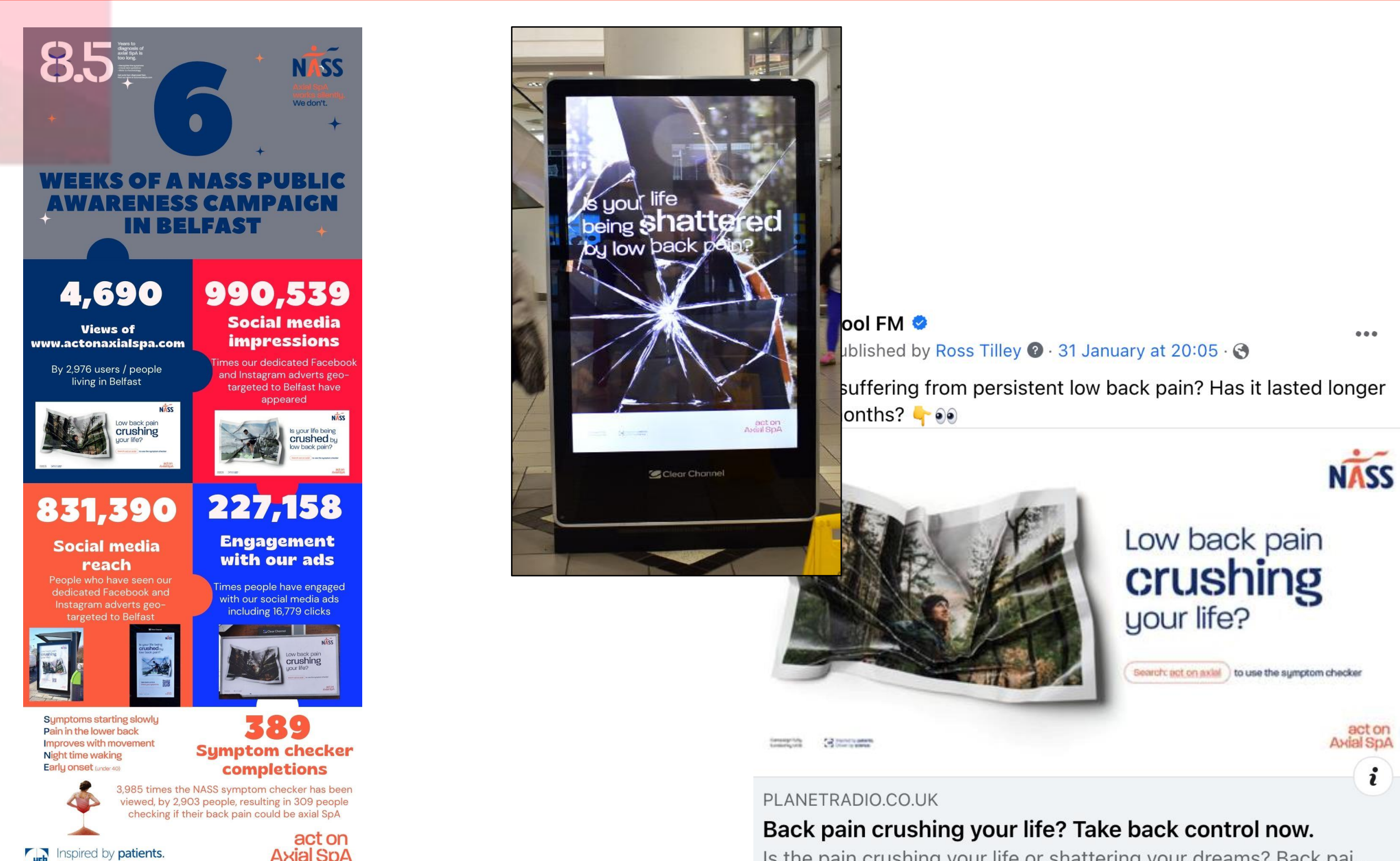
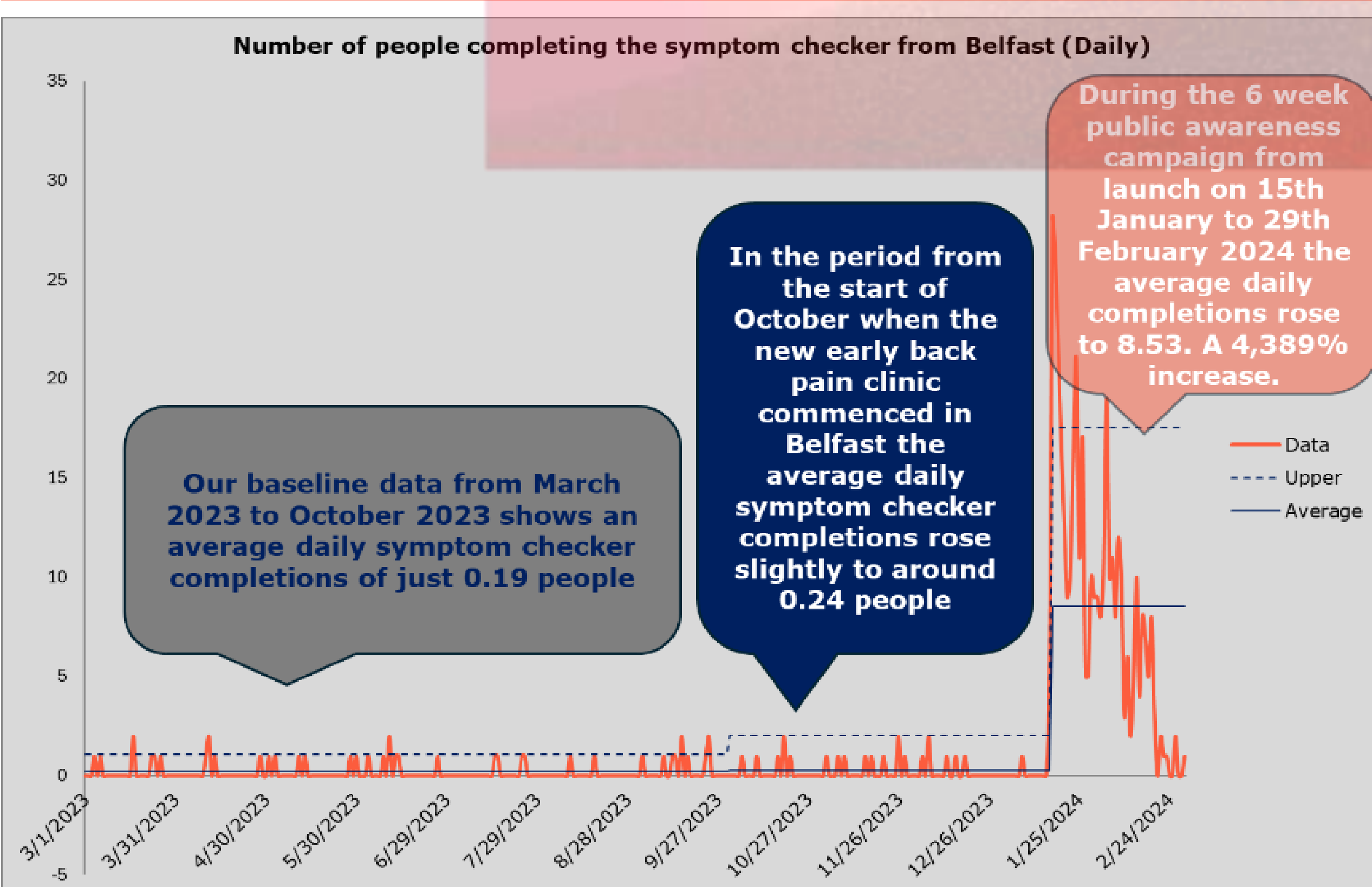


Figure 1 – Number of people completing the NASS symptom checker in Belfast. (Source: Google Analytics)

Figure 2 – Campaign results infographic (Source: Google Analytics and Meta Analytics)

CONCLUSION

From the 389 symptom checker completions, approximately 285 people (73%) met the threshold for being referred to rheumatology and we now track these referrals through clinic to understand the outcome and ultimately how many of these have been diagnosed with axial SpA.

Our findings demonstrate the effectiveness of engaging individuals with longstanding low back pain through innovative, visually compelling marketing materials to promote public health messaging. Moreover, early clinical data suggests that heightened public awareness can be achieved without overwhelming the healthcare system, while expediting patients' journeys towards diagnosis. By continuing to monitor referrals and diagnoses, we aim to assess the long-term impact of our campaign on addressing delays in axial SpA diagnosis.