

10 November 2017

Dear Colleague,

Winter Plans and Arrangements for Primary Medical Care Services during the Christmas and New Year Period

Local A&E Delivery Boards are responsible for developing plans to ensure that there is sufficient capacity across the system to manage the expected surge in demand over the winter period, including Christmas and New Year.

You will appreciate that Primary Care Services are part of a much wider health and care system comprising of many interdependent services. It is therefore important that each part of the system plays its specific role in order to minimise undue pressures on any one part of the system, particularly in A&E.

Last winter was a particularly challenging period for the NHS. Thanks to the huge efforts of frontline staff, including general practice, patients continued to receive safe care during this period.

To support local CCG winter plans, NHS England's communications over the winter period will reiterate to members of the public that GP services are available during core hours, and that A&E services are not the default. In addition, we are asking practices to help signpost patients to ensure they receive the right care, in the right place, at the right time. This will include – where available – the offer of extended access to routine general practice appointments, including in the evenings and weekends. Where such arrangements are in place, information that you can use to do this is will be sent to practices by their CCG. There will also be local promotion of services before and during the Christmas and New Year period to raise public awareness.

As the commissioner of Primary Care Services NHS England, and CCGs with delegated responsibility for Primary Medical Care, have responsibility to ensure patients have confidence in the availability of primary care services, including Primary Medical, Dental and Community Pharmacy, over the Christmas and New Year period. Therefore, we thought it would be helpful to set out the commissioners' expectations of Primary Medical Care over this period.

Christmas and New Year's Eve:

In the run up to Christmas and New Year's Eve, Friday 22nd and Friday 29th December 2017 are normal working days. All our partner health and social care agencies are working on this basis. The expectation is that practices

are open from 08:00 to 18:30 unless alternative arrangements, as described in Appendix A, are agreed in advance with your NHS England local office.

Those practices that provide Extended Hours on these days under the Directed Enhanced Service (DES) may wish to request a move of these hours to another day within the Christmas and New Year period to help meet any surge in demand. Such requests will be checked by the CCG to ensure the plans align with the broader Local A&E Delivery Board plans for this period.

Weekends over Christmas and New Year:

Those practices that provide Extended Hours under the DES over the weekend on the 23rd and/or 24th December 2017 and 30th December/31st December 2017 may again wish to request a move of these hours to another day within the Christmas and New Year period. The principles as outlined for Christmas and New Year's Eve apply.

Bank Holidays:

Monday 25th and Tuesday 26th December 2017 and Monday 1st January 2018 are bank holidays and normal bank holiday arrangements should be in place to ensure that patients can access primary medical care during this period. These arrangements may be supplemented by specific Local A&E Delivery Board led initiatives (e.g. GP at A&E) to help manage the expected surge in demand over this period.

Again, those practices that would normally provide Extended Hours on these days of the week may wish to request a move of these hours to another day within the Christmas and New Year period to help manage demand. The principles as outlined for Friday 22nd and Friday 29th December apply.

Sharing Information:

If Extended Hours sessions need to be changed due to falling on one of the days listed above please consider how patients will be informed in advance by the practice, by utilising patient communications and the practice website.

It would also be beneficial for practices to hold information for sign posting to other local primary care services over the holiday period, including considering links on the practice websites, such as:

- Dental out of hours
- Community pharmacy provision, including any minor ailment and urgent medicine supply services, if applicable
- Urgent Care Centres, Minor Injury Units, Walk-In-Centres/Urgent Treatment Centres
- Local GP access hub provision, if applicable
- Any additional CCG commissioned capacity/activity, if applicable

We would also request that practices please review information provided on telephones/answerphones regarding the provision of services outside of core practice hours, to ensure this is up to date in signposting patients to the appropriate services.

We hope that this communication provides clarity in relation to commissioner expectations of Primary Medical Care over the Christmas and New Year period. If there are any questions please contact the NHS England local office contracting team.

Thank you for your continued support hard work and commitment to providing high quality and safe services to NHS patients.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Procter', with a stylized flourish on the left side.

Laila Pennington and Mark Procter
Heads of Primary Care
NHS England South West

Appendix A: Contractual considerations for practices

If a patient cannot speak to your Practice Receptionist during Core Hours (08:00-18:30 Monday to Friday, excluding Bank Holidays) over the holiday period, you will need to confirm what arrangements are in place to deliver the contractual obligations.

Whilst the GMS Contract Regulations regarding the provision of core and essential services during “core hours” is not a “doors open” requirement, these provisions do impose a contractual responsibility on the Contractor for patient care during this period.

This means that the practice retains responsibility for ensuring that the care provided during core hours is appropriate to meet the reasonable needs of your patients. It is not acceptable to close the doors and rely on an answer machine message advising patients to contact another provider where no prior arrangements have been made (e.g. contact 111 or attend A&E).

If the practice is “doors closed” during core hours, then patients need to have clarity about how to access essential services. As a minimum, you will need to have a system in place so that patients can access GP services, including urgent care, either by ringing the surgery and:

1. Being able to talk directly to a clinician to ascertain how they can access services if they need to;
2. An answer-phone message signposting the patient to an on-call GP for the practice.

If the on-call GP arrangement is part of a service commissioned by the CCG (e.g. using the OOH service in-hours) then this must be with prior written agreement with both the provider and the CCG commissioner of that service.

In addition the Contract Regulations require a practice to notify their commissioner of their proposal to sub-contract. Where this is the case the commissioner will need to be assured that such an arrangement will deliver essential medical services during core hours otherwise the commissioner will be unable to accept the proposal. This notification should be made at least 28 days prior to the commencement of the sub-contract.

Providers of urgent and emergency care, including GP OOHs, have previously expressed concern about early closing of general practices at Christmas and New Year and the potential impact on them. Given the pressures that the urgent and emergency care system already faces during this period, this may not be a reasonable or sustainable service option.

In summary practices are expected to be open from 08:00 to 18:30, Monday to Friday excluding bank holidays, unless alternative arrangements are notified and agreed in advance . If these arrangements are not in place, or if tested they fail, this may amount to a breach of your contract.

Appendix B – preparation checklist for Christmas and New Year period

Task	Responsibility	Completed
1. Plans are in place to ensure the identification of high risk community based patients and to profile their care management over the extended holiday period appropriately.		
2. The fax is operational throughout.		
3. The telephone divert arrangements are updated for holidays and a staff member is contactable/scheduled to check that the phones are still working properly over the course of the Christmas and New year weekend and bank holiday periods and can remedy any faults / issues if needed.		
4. Third party call handling divert arrangements are updated – where used and are successfully operational.		
5. Ensure that any changes to access times are clearly advertised on NHS Choices/practice website/in practice. If the practice uses a pre-recorded message when patients telephone, you may wish to consider using this to remind patients about changes for the holiday period.		
6. In the weeks before the BH period, highlight to patients the need to plan for sufficient repeat medication to cover them for the BH period. Information to patients could include pharmacy opening times over the Christmas period.		
7. Check Business Continuity Plans are up-to-date, particularly ensuring that contact details for local health organisations are correct.		
8. Any changes to Extended Hours DES advertised in practice in advance		