Improving Access to General Practice

Communications guide and resource pack

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1. Introduction

This communications guide and resource pack has been designed and produced by NHS England to support commissioners and general practice providers to inform and signpost patients to ways they can access general practice appointments, one of the seven core requirements for improving access.

The guide includes practical advice on how to develop a range of communications activities, in addition to information on developing a communications plan, identifying local target audiences and other stakeholders and suggestions for a range of advertising materials that could be produced.

The resources included in this guide can be used as they are and/or tailored to meet local needs. Some commissioners and providers may wish to develop more wide ranging marketing activities for their area or consider focusing on particular options, such as digital communications, based on the needs of the local population. Further details on these options are included later in this guide.

NHS England welcomes comments or suggestions to contribute to future versions of the guide. Please contact england.gpaccess@nhs.net.
2. Background

To date, support for improved access to general practice services has been delivered through 57 GP Access Fund pilot schemes, covering more than 2,500 practices and a population of over 18 million people.

The General Practice Forward View published in April 2016 set out plans to enable clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) to commission and fund additional capacity across England to ensure that, by 2020 everyone has improved access to GP services including sufficient routine appointments at evenings and weekends to meet locally determined demand, alongside effective access to out of hours and urgent care services. The NHS Operational Planning and Contracting Guidance 2017 - 2019 sets out the funding trajectory for this work, supporting CCGs to deliver extended access as part of delivering the General Practice Forward View.

Commissioners and providers will be required to demonstrate they are meeting a number of core requirements in order to access funding for additional services.

This includes advertising and ease of access:

- Ensure services are advertised to patients, including notification on practice websites, notices in local urgent care services and publicity into the community, so that it is clear to patients how they can access these appointments and associated service; and

- Ensure ease of access for patients including all practice receptionists able to direct patients to the service and offer appointments to extended hours services on the same basis as appointments to non-extended hours services, and patients should be offered a choice of evening or weekend appointments on an equal footing to core hours appointments.

This communications guide and resource pack should be used to ensure commissioners and practices are meeting that core requirement.

Further resources:

The Improving Access to General Practice website contains a wide range of products and resources, together with lessons learned from the 57 pilot schemes.
3. Communications plan

Commissioners and providers should be clear about how they intend to advertise and signpost patients to improved access and should produce a communications plan setting out how they will achieve this core requirement.

The plan should identify key target audiences, an outline of planned communications activities and timescales. CCG communications teams may be able to offer general practice providers advice or assistance with this, if required.

A communications plan should demonstrate how services will be promoted to local patients and other audiences. Some of the key elements to include are outlined below:

**Communications aims and objectives**
- What are the aims and objectives of the communications and what do they need to achieve?

**Messages: what are the key messages?**
- What does your audience need to know (considering that these messages may be slightly different for different groups)?
- What’s the offer, where and how do patients and others access the services? Some suggested messages for patients are included in the following pages.

**Audiences: who are the audiences?**
- Who are the key audiences? These might be for example, patients, carers, other health professionals and local stakeholders, such as your local MP.
- What do you know about the audiences and how they might like to receive information?
- List all the audiences that might be interested in finding out about your services, e.g. patients, carers, healthcare professionals etc.
- Consider any requirement to produce communications in languages other than English, depending on the needs of the local population.

**Channels: how will the messages reach the audience?**
- Are there any existing communications channels to reach the audiences? For example, websites, posters in different locations, emails, newsletters etc.
- You may want to consider other new and innovative channels such as podcasts, webinars, desk drops or postcards.
- It is helpful to use a range of channels, rather than relying on one option, as this will reach a wider audience.

Please refer to sections 5 and 6 for further information on Print and Digital channels along with links to templates and resources.
**Tactics: what activities will be delivered?**
- What will be the most effective ways of communicating with the audience, given the communications channels available?
- What is the most appropriate format for the audience to ensure they receive and understand the messages?

**Risks: are there any communications risks or issues?**
- Are there any risks to be aware of that might have an impact on the communications?

**Timing: what are the timescales?**
- If a new service is being launched, or services are changing, what are the timescales? What is the launch date? How will communications support that?
- Ensure there is sufficient time: better to be ready early than deliver communications too late.

**Evaluation: will communications success be measured?**
- Consider how you will assess whether you achieved the aims and objectives you originally set out.
- Think about any information or data you might need to collect to evaluate effectively, e.g. will you conduct a survey of your patients to gauge their understanding of your services? Will you monitor website hits?
- As a minimum, monitor utilisation of services to give an indication of whether messages about improved access are being received and understood.

Further details about specific communications activities are included in the following pages of this guide.

**Further resources:**
See the resources section for links to further information.
4. Key messages for patients

The following are examples of key messages for patients which could be used and/or adapted for use in local areas. Consider the timing of messages to raise awareness before launching a new service whilst also being clear about when the service will be available from.

- Local GP practices are working together to offer patients better access to GP appointments in [insert location] – that means you will be able to see a GP or practice nurse [or other health professional] at a time which is most convenient for you;

- You can now book appointments to see a GP or practice nurse or other health professional in the evenings or at weekends from [insert timings] to [insert timings];

- There are now a range of ways you can get advice from your GP or practice nurse, including over the telephone and online [tailor as appropriate]. Speak to the practice receptionist or a member of the practice team to find out more;

- To arrange an appointment, speak to the practice receptionist or member of the practice team or call the practice on [add number]

CCGs should also consider explaining how any new general practice services fit with existing NHS services already in place in the local area, for example out of hours or emergency care, to ensure that patients know which services to use and when.
5. Printed materials and advertising

NHS England has produced a range of advertising templates for display in practices and/or around the local area. Printed materials are a useful way to promote new services but consideration should be given to how and where to display them to achieve the greatest impact.

The following templates are available to access on the NHS England website.

- Poster (A3, A4 available)
- A5 flyer (with space for local information)
- Label (e.g. for prescription bags)
- Freestanding desktop display (tent card)
- A4 table top display (strut card)
- Pull up banner

There are a number of options to consider when thinking about advertising in the local area. Depending on the budget available, places to consider include:

- In a practice, using the patient noticeboard or digital patient information screens
- Local community newsletters, magazines or other publications
- Billboard advertising
- Bus stop advertising/adverts on-board local public transport
- Roadside posters
- Digital posters at local train or bus stations
- Press advertising.

It will also be important to ensure local services are advertised in other health settings. As a minimum, information about access to general practice services should be advertised in local A&E departments as well as other relevant areas in hospital or NHS buildings.

A local print or design company will be able to help produce these promotional items or providers could seek advice from their local CCG communications teams.

Further resources:
See the resources section for examples from existing improved access schemes.
6. Digital communications

Digital communications are a useful way to reach a wide range of local audiences and can often be low cost/no cost to produce, offering excellent value for money.

Commissioners and providers should consider some or all of the following:

**Electronic display screens**
- A range of templates are available on the [NHS England website](https://www.england.nhs.uk), including a graphic that can be used on patient information screens.

**Videos**
- Video a GP, member of the practice team or patient representative talking about the new services for display on practice information screens or websites. Videos should ideally be produced in a high definition resolution and no longer than three minutes in length, with subtitles to ensure they are as accessible as possible. Local CCG communications teams may be able to offer support or advice on video production.

**Text messages**
- Use the practice’s SMS texting service to inform patients about any new or extended services.

**Phone messages**
- Record a message on the practice phone line which patients can access before selecting the service they require.

**Websites**
- Place a promotional banner on the practice website advertising any new or extended services and the times they are available. A template web banner is available on the [NHS England website](https://www.england.nhs.uk). As a minimum, ensure that information regarding improved access to general practice services is placed on each practice’s website, and that this information can be easily accessed i.e. on the website homepage.

**Emails**
- Place a promotional banner at the bottom of practice emails advertising any new or extended services and times they are available. A template email banner is available on the [NHS England website](https://www.england.nhs.uk).

**Further resources:**
See the resources section for examples from existing extended access schemes.
Social media

- Consider using Twitter, Facebook or other social media tools to advertise local services. Images for use in social media are available on the [NHS England website](http://www.england.nhs.uk/gp).

**Twitter (www.twitter.com)**
Allows users to publish short messages of up to 140 characters and can reach a wide and varied audience, but bear in mind this can include many people outside of the local area. Speak to local CCG communications teams who may be able to offer support or advice on using Twitter.

**Facebook (www.facebook.com)**
A popular, free social networking site which a number of GP practices already use to share information with their patients. Practices who don’t already have a Facebook page could consider setting up an account and encouraging patients to stay up to date with all the latest information.

Further resources:

See the resources section for more information on social media and digital communications.
Regional or local press, TV and/or radio may be interested in information about new or improved general practice services and ways that these are improving access for patients.

Commissioners and providers could consider developing:

- a press notice to demonstrate the positive ways that practices are changing ways of working, e.g. increasing the number of appointments available or offering appointments in different ways such as by telephone or online.
- a case study with a GP, the practice team or patient representative to help promote the positive impact of the new or improved services.
- an advertisement for the local newspaper setting out services available, opening hours, where to go and contact details.

Consider including a quote from a local stakeholder, such as a local Healthwatch representative, elected representative or member of the practice’s patient participation group.

It will be important to explain how any new services fit with NHS services already in place, such as out of hours or emergency care.

CCG communications teams or the local NHS England office may be able to offer advice or assistance with engaging local media and practices are encouraged to share any press notices with their local CCG for information.

**Further resources:**

See the resources section for further information on press and media communications.
8. NHS Identity

The templates provided follow the NHS Identify guidelines. The guidelines are available on the NHS England website together with a wide range of examples of ways that the NHS Identity can be applied, including appropriate use of the NHS logo.

Patients and the public see the NHS as a single, national, unified service and expect and want the NHS Identity to be applied in a consistent and uniform way. This reassures them that they can rely on the quality of healthcare being provided wherever they access it.

Extensive research and engagement has been carried out to ensure the NHS Identity is based on the views and needs of patients, the public and stakeholders.

Correct application of the NHS Identity:

• helps signpost the public to services, thereby supporting their appropriate use;

• helps the public to hold the NHS to account – by making clear when individuals are accessing NHS services (and when they are not);

• is an important way through which we maintain public confidence in the NHS.

Further resources:
See the resources section for further information on branding and identity.
9. Accessibility

From 1 August 2016 onwards, all organisations that provide NHS care or adult social care were legally required to follow the Accessible Information Standard.

The standard aims to make sure that people who have a disability, impairment or sensory loss are provided with information that they can easily read or understand and with support so they can communicate effectively with health and social care services.

NHS England has provided further information relating to the Accessible Information Standard. Commissioners and providers are encouraged to consider their local population regarding the need for materials to be translated into different languages or easy read formats.

Further resources:
See the resources section for further information.
10. Evaluation

Commissioners and providers should evaluate all their communications activity to gain a better understanding of what are the most effective ways to reach and communicate with their local populations. This will also demonstrate the value for money that their communications activity has achieved.

Understanding which communications activities work best will enable commissioners and providers to plan and use their communications budget and other resources as effectively as possible in the future.

Consider surveys, which gauge patients’ level of understanding or add a link to the practice’s website to gather feedback from patients and other audiences.

**Further resources:**
See the resources section for further information.
11. Resources

The following resources may be useful when developing and delivering communications campaigns:

Communications in health care improvement
Toolkit produced by the Health Foundation for health care professionals working in improvement who want to understand and use communications to better plan, implement and spread their work.

Guide to campaign planning
Provides useful information on structuring communications campaign planning.

Smart Guide to Practices and Patient Engagement
Supports clinical commissioning groups to engage in sustainable and useful ways with patient participation groups.

Social Media Toolkit for the NHS
Produced by NHS Employers, this toolkit provides advice on engaging patients and other audiences via social media.

NHS Identity Guidelines
Produced by NHS England, offers guidelines explaining who can use the NHS Identity and NHS logo and how it should be applied.

Accessible Information Standard
Information on meeting the Accessible Information Standard to ensure people who have a disability, impairment or sensory loss are provided with information that they can easily read or understand.

Government Communications Service
Guidance on a broad range of current communications topics.

GP Access Fund website
Access a range of resources, information and case studies with shared learning from the GP Access Fund pilot schemes.

Patient Surveys
Please contact england.gpaccess@nhs.net to request an example patient survey for use at a practice level.
12. Examples from existing schemes

Advertising

To note: the above examples reflect services that were being offered at that time.

Digital

Havering Primary Care Access Hubs: patient perspective

Havering Primary Care Access Hub: staff perspective
13. **Examples from the #GPLondon campaign**

a month long campaign delivered in April 2017 by NHS England (London)

**Infographics**

Most Londoners are now able to book urgent or routine appointments with a local GP, 8am - 8pm 7 days a week

Call your own practice and ask to book into a local GP access hub, or ring 111 for more information

We’re talking about General Practice in the capital. Share your story or follow

#GPLondon

3 - 21 April 2017

**Tweets**

Calling 111 this #Easter can help you access the right care for your condition. #GPLondon

ow.ly/e8hV30aNesE

Need medical attention in London over the Easter Bank Holiday?

For urgent care that’s not an emergency, call 111 for advice or to book a local GP appointment

**Youtube**

GP access in London: Views from Dr Tom Coffey

www.medium.com/primary-care-in-london
For further information

www.england.nhs.uk/gpaccess

england.gpaccess@nhs.net

#GPForwardView and #GPAccess

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