

Plan set out to improve access for NHS patients and support GPs

The NHS, working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care, has today published a blueprint for improving access to GP appointments for patients alongside supporting GPs and their teams.

Surgeries will be provided with additional funding to boost their capacity to increase the proportion of appointments delivered face to face, as part of a major drive to support general practice and level up performance, including additional efforts to tackle abuse against staff.

The measures, including a £250 million winter access fund from NHS England, will enable GP practices to improve availability so that patients who need care can get it, often on the same day if needed. The investment will fund locums and support from other health professionals such as physiotherapists and podiatrists, with a focus on increasing capacity to boost urgent same-day care. This is in addition to £270 million invested over the previous 11 months to expand capacity and support GPs.

Amanda Pritchard, chief executive of the NHS, said:

Improving access to high quality general practice is essential for our patients and for the rest of the NHS too.

It is a personal priority and today NHS England is taking both urgent and longer term action to back GPs and their teams with additional investment and support.

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Sajid Javid said:

I am determined to ensure patients can see their GP in the way they want, no matter where they live. I also want to thank GPs and their teams for their enormous efforts in the most challenging times in living memory.

Our new plan provides general practice teams with investment and targeted support. This will tackle underperformance, taking pressure off staff so they can spend more time with patients and increase the number of face-to-face appointments.

Alongside this we are setting out more measures to tackle abuse and harassment so staff at GP surgeries who work so tirelessly to care for patients can do so without having to fear for their safety.

The NHS England document makes clear that every GP practice must seek

patients' input and respect preferences for face to face care unless there are good clinical reasons to the contrary.

The extra investment will help to increase the number of appointments delivered, while local health systems will be free to determine how best to tackle particular challenges to access and provision of care in their own community, which could include putting in place additional resource for walk-in consultations.

Local plans will need to deliver these improvements in access, with practices that do not provide appropriate levels of face to face care not able to access the additional funding, and instead offered support to improve.

Under the plan, the NHS will also support upgrades to telephone systems, ensuring that more patients can quickly and easily speak to general practice staff, and help the public avoid long waits when contacting a surgery by phone.

The government will also reduce administrative burdens on GPs by reforming who can provide medical evidence and certificates such as FIT notes and DVLA checks – freeing up time for more appointments.

UKHSA will complete its review of infection prevention and control (IPC) guidance in general practice and set out practical steps on IPC measures in GP settings which could increase the number of patients that can be seen.

As part of this package, the NHS will increase its oversight of practices with the most acute issues in relation to access, and GP appointment data will be published at practice level by spring next year. This will enhance transparency and accountability, as monthly data is currently only published by clinical commissioning group.

In addition, patients will get the opportunity to rate their practice's performance, via text message, based on their most recent experience of accessing support. This survey, which has been previously agreed with the profession, is being piloted in around 60 practices and will be rolled out next year.

Together with the government and Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, the NHS will also develop a zero-tolerance campaign on abuse of NHS staff, including GP teams.

General practice teams have delivered more than 300 million appointments over the last year as well as delivering the vast majority of Covid vaccinations, saving lives and protecting millions of people against the virus at speed.

Health Minister Maria Caulfield said:

As a nurse on the frontline during the pandemic I know how hard GPs and their teams have worked, while recognising how badly so many people want to see their GPs in person.

This plan will give our dedicated general practices the support needed to increase capacity, boosting the number of appointments for patients to see and speak to their GP practice.

I look forward to continuing to work with the sector to ensure patients can get the care they need.

Patients will also be able to see different types of clinicians in general practice, who can best meet their needs and conditions, including pharmacists, paramedics, advanced nurse practitioners and nursing associates.

NHS England will also work with the government to consider how far and fast the role of pharmacists can be increased in the supply of medication, as part of relieving workload on GPs.