

Summary of NHS England and Improvement Letters to GP Practices March, April & May 2020

NHS England and Improvement have been sending out a series of letters to GP Practices in England to summarise the approaches the system is taking in tackling the unique challenge that Covid-19 is presenting to the health system.

1 May 2020

This letter, which can be found [here](#), highlighted the challenge faced by care homes in the pandemic and seeks support from primary care and community health services. It made particular reference to PCNs being the default provider for this care home support, which includes, weekly check-ins, personalised care and support plans for care home residents and pharmacy and medication support to care homes.

14 April 2020 Letter

This letter from NHSE can be found [here](#) and included:

- Changes to the GP Contract Regulations;
- Reference to the published Network Contract DES; and
- NHS immunisations.

The changes to the regulations largely sought to formalise the arrangements announced in the letter of 19 March 2020, including enabling certain terms of contracts to be suspended to free up support e.g. new patient reviews, over-75 health-checks, routine medication reviews etc. The contract changes also include increasing the number of appointments practices make available for direct booking for 111.

Between 27 March and 14th April

Various letters and guidance were issued by NHSE to include the following:

- Details of pre-approved suppliers for online and video consultation following procurement;
- Guidance for remote working – issued on 30 March 2020;
- Letter dated 31st March 2020 in relation to the arrangements for Diabetes Programme delivery;
- Guidance on provisions in the Coronavirus Act relating to death certification and cremation forms; and
- Letter dated 31st March 2020 for NHS volunteer responders information.

27 March 2020 Letter

This letter from NHSE can be found [here](#) and included:

- Guidance on COVID-19 primary care operating model and implementation within general practice
- Patient registration
- Further support for the workforce
- Returning to general practice
- Digital isolation note for patients now available online
- Information governance
- Potential of different medicines for use in treating COVID-19
- Use of fax machines
- Electronic Prescription Service (EPS)
- Bank holiday preparations • Details of our next webinar
- Additional sources of information

It made reference to the National Supply Distribution Response's (NSDR) telephone number, that being 0800 915 9964, to provide a method of communication for healthcare professionals to contact in order to obtain "pre-packed kits" of PPE.

It referred to NHS111 online's cohort system for triaging those who use the system, in order that those who present with the most severe symptoms are fast-tracked into the healthcare system.

It asked all GPs to conduct a review of their patient lists, to identify (i) which patients are at most risk, and (ii) their care plans, but the end of March.

It provided options and guidance on how GPs should manage patients who are presenting with symptoms, guiding GPs to consider options on a case by case basis and tackle each situation individually to ensure the best care could be provided. The letter generally opted for remote consultations as preferable, but understood this was not always possible.

19 March 2020 Letter (Third)

This letter made reference to the 17 March letter and highlighted further updates and guidance for GP Practices and can be found [here](#). It covered a number of topics:

1. Advice and Guidance
2. Service Implications and Priorities
3. Arrangements to free up capacity and protect income
4. Further communications

The letter also presented a number of tables which were referred to at the end of the letter. These tables highlighted what the NHS advises GP practices to do with specific functions of their business, such as medication reviews, patient reviews, and over-75 health checks.

It also highlighted that PCN Clinical Directors can delegate many of their functions to non-clinicians where appropriate amongst other measures.

Annex A of the letter set out the practical steps to support GP practices with remote triage and remote management of patients. It sets out the actions that commissioners, PCNs, and practices should be taking to ensure they can enable digital consultation.

The letter also stated that NHSE&I were temporarily lifting the restrictions on the maximum number of daytime in hours sessions GPs currently supported by the National GP Retention Scheme may conduct, provided two conditions were met:

1. The increased participation is voluntary
2. The retained GPs have access to their existing level of support.

17 March 2020 Letter

On 17 March 2020 NHSE sent Next Steps on NHS response to Covid-19 from both Simon Stevens and Amanda Pritchard. It can be found [here](#) on NHSE's website, with the updated SOPs found [here](#).

This letter sets out important actions the NHS wanted every part of the health system to redirect staff and resources, with the aims of these changes to be to:

- Free-up the maximum possible inpatient and critical care capacity.
- Prepare for, and respond to, the anticipated large numbers of COVID-19 patients who will need respiratory support.
- Support staff and maximise their availability.
- Play our part in the wider population measures newly announced by Government.
- Stress-test operational readiness.
- Remove routine burdens, so as to facilitate the above.

It directed GPs to immediately:

1. Free-up the maximum possible inpatient and critical care capacity;
The NHS' aim is to have 30,000 of the 100,000 critical care beds available for use.
2. Prepare for, and respond to, large numbers of inpatients requiring respiratory support;
Re PPE, the letter highlighted the existence of a contact number for those practices who are experiencing problems with distribution of PPE. The telephone numbers given were 0800 915 9964 and 0191 283 6543, with an email address being supplydisruptionservice@nhsbsa.nhs.uk.
3. Support the staff, and maximise staff availability;
This section highlighted the national drive to bring retired clinicians back into the workforce to support the national effort.
4. Support the wider population measures newly announced by Government, found [here](#);

5. Stress-test their operational readiness; and
This required providers to check their business continuity plans and review the latest SOPs which can be found [here](#).
6. Remove routine burdens.
This mentioned that the NHS would cancel all routine CQC inspections and providing additional funding to cover the costs of responding to Coronavirus emergency.

10 March 2020 Letter (Second)

This letter explained that the NHS had commissioned a "Covid-19 Home Management Service" (CHMS) in all parts of England, to be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It can be found [here](#).

The letter highlighted that Covid-19 patients were previously isolated in hospitals, but that patients who are suitable for home management should now be self-isolating and supported in the community through the CHMS.

At this point Public Health England categorised patients as follows:

- Category 1 – Require immediate admission
- Category 2 – Home isolation with active health monitoring
- Category 3 – Home isolation with health advice

This has subsequently been superseded by a "cohort system" as per the letter on 27 March 2020 in relation to NHS 111's way to categorising patients.

This letter also set out that the NHS would be running two targeted webinars on 12 March, the first to discuss the support in place for colleagues and patients with the second webinar exploring how to use remote triaging and online consultations in managing Covid-19.

5 March 2020 Letter (First)

This first letter explained that Covid-19 was placing new and increasing challenges on already busy GP practices across the country. It can be found [here](#).

The letter provided links to the latest of guidance (at the time, being [here](#)), the latest standard operation (at the time, found [here](#)), and the "interim advice" from Public Health England, found [here](#).

The letter gave useful resources for GP Practices to display on their websites and made reference to materials that the practices could use to share with their patients, such as posters and leaflet.

The letter also set out how the NHS aimed to communicate with the recipients of the letter, highlighting the Central Alerting System and the Commissioner's cascade as the two main methods of communication.