

How to support patients during GP closures and mergers :

The Healthwatch Guide

Healthwatch's across the South East have heard from many patients about their concerns and fears following GP closures and mergers. We have shared all of the issues we've heard with Clinical Commissioning Groups to ensure they are fully informed about patient concerns. We hope that commissioners use this opportunity to reflect on the way patients are informed and supported during this difficult time.

Whilst we recognise that practices will have to close or merge due to the lack of GPs, we believe patients could be better supported during this time. Therefore, we have created the following checklist for CCGs and Practices to use in this situation.

Making the decision

- Has the PPG been informed and involved in plenty of time before any decision has been made?
- What other community groups or organisations could be involved in these discussions to give a wider view?
- How else could you reach patients to seek their views - community Facebook page, parish magazine, posters in pubs, village halls, streetlamps?
- Have you reached all parts of the community including the protected characteristics?
- Has the impact of the closure/merger on vulnerable groups been fully assessed and have they been communicated with?
- Have neighbouring practices been informed and has it been clarified if they can cope with extra demand?
- Are the public meetings held in a suitable venue close to the location to enable as many people as possible to share their views?
- The patient letter should be shared with Healthwatch and the PPG prior to distribution to enable changes to be made.

- Have all the options been considered including:
 - Other practices across the CCG/County border if relevant.
 - Relationships between the Practice and Care Home/Sheltered Housing.
 - Transport to other practices particularly in rural areas.
 - Additional support for particular patients such as children with complex needs, people with language or learning difficulties and mental health patients.

After the decision

- Is the patient letter written in a supportive, constructive, plain English manner? Will the letter reassure patients particularly those who have long term or complex conditions?
- Are the clinical needs of long term or complex patients being considered during the handover period to ensure they get the care they need?
- Does the letter for patients provide information so that they can give an informed choice about where to re-register?
- What support will be offered to neighbouring practices to enable them to cope with increased demand and pressure on appointment systems?
- What support will be offered to patients who may need additional help to register with a new practice?
- How will patients who are in temporary or transient accommodation be contacted? Could text be an option?
- How will the learning, knowledge and enthusiasm of the PPG group be utilised by neighbouring practices?
- How will the take up of re-registrations be monitored and what efforts are in place to reach people who haven't re-registered?
- Any letter or communication to patients needs to take into account their individual communication needs as set out in the Accessible Information Standard.

This checklist is intended to be a supporting guide for NHS organisations who are dealing with GP closures. It also clearly sets out how we would expect them to support patients during this time. If you require more information contact your local Healthwatch

Produced by Healthwatch Kent in collaboration with Healthwatch East Sussex, Healthwatch West Sussex, Healthwatch Brighton & Hove, Healthwatch Medway and Healthwatch Surrey