

NAPP Briefing: *Patient Participation Groups' experiences of operating remotely during the pandemic*

Overview

The coronavirus pandemic has triggered profound and rapid changes in general practice. Within weeks of the outbreak in England, the proportion of face to face GP consultations shifted from 70% to 23%.¹

Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) play a crucial role in primary care as a key link between patients and general practice. During this period, they too, have experienced a shift in how, when and where they have been able to meet.

The National Association for Patient Participation (NAPP) wished to learn more about its members' experience of operating digitally during the pandemic, including what worked, and what other PPGs and practices could learn from this. NAPP asked its members for their feedback in October 2020, and between 9th October and 9th November 2020 received 24 replies from PPGs across England.²

The role of Patient Participation Groups in general practice

Patient Participation Groups have a wide-ranging role in general practice. This can involve providing perspectives from patients; improving communication between the practice and patients; promotion of self-care to patients, alongside influencing the development of services. Since 2016, GP practices in England have a contractual requirement to have a PPG in place.

What were the positive changes that occurred from PPGs' meeting online?

All the respondents (with the exception of one) had moved their PPG meetings online. For a number of PPGs, their enthusiasm in moving their regular meetings online was matched by the practice staff.

'We have been having regular PPG meetings via Zoom at our normal frequency throughout this period. We continue to have GP and practice manager representation. No persuasion was needed!'

A PPG in the West Midlands

Some PPGs reflected on the popularity and quality of their meetings. This varied from online meetings proving easier to attend than face to face meetings, being able to move forward with administrative changes, and it being easier to access and involve practice staff.

'Zoom meetings have proved to be popular because members do not have to turn out at night but we can meet from the comfort of home. People say they can hear better (we are quite an elderly group!) and everyone gets a chance to speak.' **A PPG in London**

'What has been good is the professionals in the practice have 'popped' in to talk about their role e.g. our new paramedic. It doesn't take

¹ RCGP RSC Workload Observatory, [Internet]. May 2020.

² One PPG reply submitted a reply without listing its PPG and has been listed as 'unknown'.

them from their job for too long and it means the PPG get to know the staff.' **A PPG in the East of England**

PPGs continued with written communication to patients, including newsletters to be sent out alongside the practice notices, and circulating agendas and minutes for their PPG meetings.

What were the challenges of holding PPG meetings online?

The overwhelming majority of responses were from PPGs who had continued to meet online during the pandemic, and therefore there is likely to be other challenges facing PPGs beyond the immediate impact of remote meetings that are not covered here.

Equally, it was clear that many respondents missed their face to face meetings, and the social interactions and activities such as supporting flu clinics that came from their PPG involvement. Alongside this many PPGs reflected on a sense of spirit and morale that recognised there was a pandemic and that a pragmatic approach was needed to continuing engagement as a PPG.

'There is no doubt that virtual meetings are a pale shadow of face-to-face meetings as we all enjoy the social intercourse our meetings are accustomed to but needs must...!'

A PPG in the East of England

Concerns were raised about barriers facing PPG members trying to access online meetings. A number of respondents had PPG members who had struggled with either the technology used for online meetings, or did not have the appropriate equipment.

'We wanted to ensure that the meetings were inclusive to all the members of the group, but we found that a very small number due to technical reasons were not able to join. To ensure they were not left out minutes of all the meetings are distributed.'

A PPG in the Midlands

What innovation happened?

During the pandemic a number of PPGs channelled their energies into working differently. For example:

- **Hosting an online health meeting:** One PPG had previously arranged health education evenings in a local church hall. As this was no longer possible, the PPG put on its first 'zoom health evening' event focused on diabetes care and enabled through the support of two GPs, a nurse specialising in diabetes care and two admin staff. Whilst another PPG had a member who was a trainer for a local initiative 'Cancel Out Cancer' and was able to facilitate such an online session alongside the GP cancer lead.
- **Discussion of patients' experience of their local general practice:** A PPG discussed patients' feedback from a small patient experience survey captured during the first lockdown, alongside patient experiences of repeat prescriptions. Both of these first-person feedback led to PPG discussions and ideas for changes.

- **Welcoming and becoming guest speakers:** A PPG has welcomed a variety of guest speakers to their online meetings including the Chief Executive of the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and a Senior Manager from the Regional Ambulance Service. Alongside this, a PPG member and practice business partner were invited to present at a CCG PPG Network meeting about their experiences of using technology for PPG meetings. Their presentation was well received and resulted in other groups in surrounding areas also using technology to facilitate their PPG meetings.

What are good ways for PPGs to engage and get their practice involved?

PPGs shared a wealth of experience and insight which may enable and encourage other PPGs to engage with their practice.

1) Regroup and find allies to work with

Active PPGs during the pandemic had some highly engaged members who had built connections with the general practice staff. In many cases this existing engagement and support enabled PPGs to move online with ease. But, for those without such engaged practice staff, it may be necessary for PPGs to regroup, reconnect and find a friendly face within the practice staff to approach to get the ball rolling.

‘The answer I believe is that we started with an active group committed to working alongside the practice and we enjoyed a high level of support from administrative and clinical staff.’ **A PPG in London**

2) Stress the benefits that patient involvement can bring to the practice

The pandemic has placed substantial pressure on patients and healthcare professionals alike, and has also generated changes in how general practice is run. The partnership between PPGs and practices can harness such insight from patients to enable improvements in their general practice.

‘The Covid crisis and on line consultations have meant that patients have felt more distanced from clinicians at a time of maximum anxiety about health. This means that it is even more important that the PPGs don’t go into long term abeyance and remain a powerful voice for patients even if it is on line.’ **A PPG in the South East**

3) Develop and share ideas that your PPG and practice could do together

During the pandemic many PPGs have pivoted and tried out new ideas including hosting a virtual health evening, inviting practice staff to speak at online meetings and discussing feedback from patient surveys in virtual meetings. This gave PPG and practice staff common goals to work towards.

Thank you

NAPP would like to thank all the PPGs who shared their experiences with us. We will continue to monitor what the impact of the pandemic is on patient involvement in general practice and would welcome hearing from any PPGs would like to share further experiences with us.