

PE2070/G: Stop same-day-only GP appointment systems

NHS Forth Valley submission, 13 May 2024

Your letter of the 22nd of March to the Chief Executive, NHS Forth Valley in response to the above petition has been passed to me for a response and I welcome the opportunity to provide this and context that I hope is useful in the consideration of this issue.

As per the requirements of the Public Bodies (Joint Working)(Scotland) Act 2014, Primary Care Services are delegated to our Integration Joint Boards (IJB) with the oversight and management of these services and contracts sitting within the Falkirk Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP), under my responsibilities as the Chief Officer to the IJB and Director of the HSCP. The NHS Board retains legal responsibility for the contract and we take a partnership and whole system approach to our support for these important services.

In relation to the issue - there are currently 48 GP Practices in the Forth Valley area, of which 47 are independently run and operated under the General Medical Services (GMS) contract and 1 which is directly managed by the HSCP.

While the GMS contract sets out many requirements for Practices and how they should deliver services, it also allows flexibility within the model for individual Practices to provide services to patients in accordance with local needs, Practice size and demographics and to put in place their own arrangements for patient access within the core hours of 8am until 6pm. As independent contractors managed by GP Partners, Practices also determine their own staffing both for clinical and administrative roles.

The Access to Personal Files Act 1987 obliges Social Work Services to make information, recorded after 1st April 1989, accessible to the subject of the information unless there are good reasons for withholding it. In receiving information, the Service will assume that it can be disclosed, without further reference to the source, unless the information contains a clear indication to the contrary.

You will be aware of the national challenge of GP recruitment and retention and these challenges are no different in Forth Valley with there

being vacancies for both salaried and partners GPs across the area. We are working closely as a system to develop approaches to attract and retain GPs at all levels within the area.

As with other health and care services there is significant demand across the area and the volume of demand being managed daily in Forth Valley by our GP Practices are significant with over 6000 appointments (routine and urgent) provided on an average day.

Demand for services are at unprecedented levels and population needs often highly complex, Practices are therefore required to operate systems to provide care to those that need it most and in a timely manner. On this basis, many Practices have a daily cut off point for any urgent or “on-the-day” issues. This is to allow the Practice teams to triage and prioritise issues appropriately. All Practices will undertake daily triage in this manner and reception teams are well trained to ask for brief details of symptoms and level of urgency to support effective care and prioritisation. While a cut off may be in place, most Practices will also operate a routine appointment system alongside this triage arrangement although it may be noted that this often is opened up for a limited time such as the next two or three weeks. This is to enable all patients to have an opportunity to book, to avoid the need for cancelling appointments should clinicians become unwell and also to minimise not attendance where appointments are booked into the future and many problems will have resolved themselves in that time.

Many Practices nationally are still struggling to meet demand and provide the level of access their patients may wish and this has been recognised in recent work commissioned by Scottish Government on the Access Principles. These have been shared with Practices locally to support them in reviewing their arrangements both for same day and routine matters. A number of Forth Valley Practices also actively engaged in the recent Health Improvement Scotland GP Access programme and made positive changes under quality improvement frameworks. A small number of Practices will operate on a same day only appointment service which is acceptable under the GMS contract given there is no stipulation under the current iteration to provide routine appointments. This is very often due to the challenge of balancing demand with capacity on a daily basis and takes cognisance of the British Medical Association guidance on safe working limits.

To improve our understanding of these pressures, NHS Forth Valley has commenced a data gathering exercise to establish capacity, staffing levels and system pressures including how this may impact on service delivery and this information is used to inform the wider system and will help to monitor trends in these areas. Senior Managers and Clinical Leads within the Primary Care team are actively involved in national work on Access arrangements, Pressures Reporting and Recruitment and Retention forums. There are gaps in the information that can be gained from the GP IT systems nationally as they currently stand in terms of appointment book levels, split between routine and urgent so we are unable to provide exact numbers of Practices in response to the queries raised in the Petition letter.

More information is available on secondary care activity including A & E attendance, Out of Hours activity etc however it is challenging to comment other than anecdotally on any connection between “on-the-day” appointment only systems and increased workload or issues elsewhere. For noting, where Practices operate a same day appointment system, many will still provide a routine service through Practice Nurses and Health Care Assistants in key areas of chronic disease management, contraception, drug monitoring and wound care. Development work on a Whole System Escalation model for Forth Valley is underway, however.

The Health and Social Care Partnerships and NHS Forth Valley have supported all Practices with the Primary Care Improvement Plan locally providing additional multi- disciplinary team members to increase capacity and expand bespoke care in areas like mental health, physiotherapy, pharmacotherapy, and urgent care. This provides significant volumes of additional appointments and many are routine. Practice reception teams trained in Care Navigation will facilitate patients accessing these as well as GP appointments according to their needs and the most appropriate care to meet those needs. We also provide support to Practices in difficult to ensure the sustainability of services as far as possible for patients.

I trust the information provided is helpful in providing a rationale for Same-day-only arrangements in place and I would be happy to clarify any point if required.