

Patient participation DES – Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

June 2011

Introduction

These FAQs have been put together to address some of the misconceptions that have arisen about the requirements of the new patient participation DES and point practices towards online resources that they may find useful. It should be read in conjunction with the BMA/NHS Employers guidance on the DES, [which is available on the BMA website](#).

Achieving productive patient involvement can be challenging for practices. The DES is not overly prescriptive about how to meet its requirements and each individual practice should decide on an approach that will be most beneficial for them and their patients.

Practices may find the following resources useful when considering how to meet the requirements of the DES:

- The BMA's Patient Liaison Group (PLG) has [created an online toolkit for doctors on patient and public involvement](#).

The PLG section of the BMA website also includes an online [guide to running a Patient Liaison Group](#) and the challenges that practices might encounter.

- The National Association of Patient Participation (NAPP) is the umbrella organisation for patient-led groups within general practice. Its website contains a variety of resources for practices. Some of NAPP's resources are restricted to members - membership costs £50 for the first year and £30 per year thereafter. See [the NAPP's website for more information](#).
- The General Practitioners Committee (GPC) published '[Developing General Practice: Listening to Patients](#)' in response to its 2009 consultation on patient engagement. It explains the benefits of patient engagement and highlights priority areas for patients

Frequently asked questions

1. Is there a minimum number of patients who must be included in a Patient Reference Group (PRG)?

No, there is no minimum number of participants or a minimum percentage of the patient list that must be included. Practices should set up a PRG that is of sufficient size to be as representative as possible of their practice population. If this is not possible practices should be able to show the steps they have taken to try and achieve this.

It will be up to practices to justify to their primary care trust (PCT) why they have chosen to use a particular format for their PRG and show that they have attempted to make it as representative as possible. However, the DES does not permit PCTs to specify that a PRG must be of a minimum size.

2. Can my existing Patient Participation Group become a Patient Reference Group for the purposes of the DES?

Practices may decide to use their existing Patient Participation Group (PPG) as the basis of their PRG. However, for the purposes of the DES, it is vital that the PRG is as representative as possible of the patient population. This may mean that the practice has to look beyond their current PPG membership to achieve this.

If a practice feels its current PPG is not sufficiently representative, it may decide to invite more patients to join or may decide to use an additional forum to involve a wider selection of patients. For instance, the practice might decide to retain its current PPG but also set up a 'virtual' group who they contact by email but who do not attend face-to-face meetings.

The annex to the BMA/NHS Employers guidance on the DES gives a 'Getting Started' guide to setting up a virtual group. In addition, [the NAPP website includes a case study of practices setting up their own virtual groups](#).

3. Is there a set of pre-approved questions that can be used in my practice's patient survey?

No, there is no set of pre-approved questions for the patient survey. Each practice's survey should focus on the priority areas identified by its PRG and these will be different for every practice.

[The NAPP website's 'Resources'](#) section includes a number of example questions that practices might like to refer to.

The BMA/NHS Employers guidance lists several guides on how to put together a good survey:

- [Smart survey design](#)
- [The survey system](#)
- [How to design and use free online surveys](#)

4. Does my practice have to set up a website if we don't already have one? Or can we simply use NHS Choices to publish the relevant information?

Participating practices must publish the following on their practice website:

- information on opening hours
- a report of the views expressed by patients in the patient survey
- the action report agreed with the PRG, following the patient survey
- the practice's local Patient Participation Report, which must be published online by 31 March. Details of what the report must include are listed in the BMA/NHS Employers guidance.

The DES guidance specifically states that "Where a practice does not already have a website, one must be set up". It will not be sufficient for practices to use their NHS Choices page to publish information relating to the DES.

However, it may be that practices setting up a new website will take some time to do so and it seems reasonable for them to share their opening hours information on NHS Choices until this is achieved. It would also be reasonable for practices to develop a shared website, for example as part of a commissioning group, as long as the information about individual practices was clear.

5. How do I make sure that my practice's PRG is representative of the patient population and what should we try to do to try to engage hard to reach groups?

It may be impossible to make a PRG fully representative of a patient population, especially for practices in particularly diverse areas. However, it will be important for the practice to demonstrate to the PCT that it has attempted to engage as representative a group of patients as possible.

The DES notes that you should put together a profile of your patients that is more detailed than age and sex. Although it is no longer compulsory for practices to continue to record ethnicity and first language, practices may find it useful to continue to do so. They will also be aware of specific groups of patients, such as residents of a nursing home.

There are a number of groups that practices are likely to find difficult to engage with. These might be, for example, people who do not speak English as a first language, mental health service users, or carers.

The BMA's PLG has put together a checklist on how to encourage participation among hard to reach groups, as part of their toolkit on Patient and Public Involvement, which is [available on the BMA website](#).

6. Do I have to form a PRG in order to change extended hours arrangements?

The Extended Hours DES and Patient Participation DES are independent DESs and it is possible to do one without the other.

Practices with extended hours must continue to set the extended opening hours according to patients' needs and wishes. They should use recent patient surveys or other local information to determine which extended hours would be most appropriate. This information may or may not be the result of discussions with a PRG or surveys undertaken as part of the Patient Participation DES.

However, if a practice has taken on both the Extended Hours DES and Patient Participation DES and wants to make changes to their extended hours then they should seek the support of their PRG. The PRG cannot veto a change but it is likely to be more difficult for the practice to demonstrate that there was a desire for the change if the group is not supportive. If the practice chooses to stop extended hours altogether they can do so but they will of course lose the money for that DES.

It is a requirement of the Patient Participation DES for the practice to include their opening hours on its web site but they are not compelled to maintain extended hours if they do not wish to do so. However, there is a strong emphasis within the Patient Participation DES guidance about providing good access and seeking patients' views on access. A practice that is not running the Extended Hours DES should therefore still consider asking their PRG about their accessibility in general.

[For further guidance on the extended hour DES for 2011 / 12 please see the BMA website.](#)