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By email to all SWL Practices

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Dear Colleague

Winter Plans and Arrangements for Primary Medical Care Services during the 2024-25 Christmas and New Year period

As we do every year, I am writing to set out expectations for access to GP services over the Christmas and New Year period.

The NHS is again set for a very challenging winter. The South West London health and care system is working hard to ensure that there is resilience across all parts of the system. This includes actions to boost capacity as set out in [NHS England » Delivering operational resilience across the NHS this winter](#). [Appendix B](#) sets out system roles and responsibilities, including for primary care to:

- Ensure plans are in place to maintain access to primary care services between 16 December 2024 and 6 January 2025, including ensuring Bank Holiday cover in line with primary care national contracts is in place so that patients can access services in primary care settings over the Christmas and New Year period.
- Plans are in place locally to increase capacity in primary care hubs during the winter, including the Christmas and New Year period. Details of this capacity and access routes will be communicated to Practices via the place team/GP Federation.

We recognise the workload and workforce pressure in all parts of the NHS during this period; however, we have a responsibility to ensure patients can continue to access services over this period, and so expectations are as follows:

Christmas and New Year's Eve

In the run-up to Christmas and the New Year, Monday 23, Tuesday 24, Friday 27, Monday 30 and Tuesday 31 December 2024 are all normal working days. All partner health and social care agencies are working on this basis.

The expectation is that Practices will be open between 08:00 and 18:30 to meet the reasonable needs of their patients. The only exception is where alternative arrangements have been agreed in advance with the South West London Primary Care team.

Where a patient contacts the Practice, an appropriate response must be provided on the same day or during the next period of core hours if the patient contacts the Practice outside of core hours.

The appropriate response must take into account the patient's needs, including the need to avoid jeopardising the patient's health, where appropriate, the patient's preferences, and any benefits to the patient of providing continuity of the health care professional involved in their care and treatment.

Practices are reminded that transferring calls to NHS 111 during normal working hours is not appropriate due to the pressure placed on other services.

Primary Care Networks providing Enhanced Access appointments on these days are expected to continue with these arrangements.

We would also like to remind Practices of the importance of managing same-day repeat prescriptions on these days to enable patients presenting to collect their prescriptions.

Weekends over Christmas and New Year:

PCN provision of Enhanced Access appointments on Saturday, December 21, and Saturday, December 28, 2024, is expected to continue as usual. However, PCN provision of Enhanced Access appointments is not required on Sundays and, therefore, does not apply on Sunday, December 22, 2024, and Sunday, December 29, 2024. Normal out-of-hours cover arrangements should be in place on these days to ensure that patients can access Primary Medical Care.

Bank Holidays:

Wednesday, 25, Thursday, 26 December 2024, and Wednesday, 1 January 2025, are bank holidays, and normal bank holiday cover arrangements should be in place to ensure patients can access Primary Medical Care during this period.

A PCN may offer services on a bank holiday if they wish and with the commissioner's agreement, but it is not a contractual requirement.¹

Sharing Information:

If PCNs Enhanced Access appointments change due to falling on one of the days listed above, please ensure patients are informed in advance by utilising Practice websites, patient communications, etc.

It will also be beneficial for all Practices to hold information for signposting to other local primary care services over the holiday period, including considering links on Practice websites, such as:

- [Pharmacy First](#) as a walk-in service from Community Pharmacy for certain conditions, i.e. sore throat, sinusitis, otitis media (children), urinary tract infections (women), shingles, infected insect bites and impetigo. Referral is also possible for a wider scope of symptoms and conditions directly from NHS111, 111Online and General Practice.
- NHS App as a point of contact to order repeat medication and access to urgent repeat

¹ The [NC DES](#) is clear that where any Enhanced Access appointments cannot be offered (for example, but not limited to, a bank holiday), the PCN must make up the cancelled time by offering additional appointments within a two-week period unless an alternative time period is agreed with the commissioner. For the avoidance of doubt, any rescheduled appointments offered in a subsequent week or agreed timeframe as additional to the minimum minutes that must be offered for that week. The PCN must ensure that all patients within the PCN are notified of the cancelled and rescheduled appointments.

medicines via NHS111 and 111Online as a referral to Community Pharmacy, Pharmacy First.

- Also, consider early reminders to patients to renew repeat prescriptions around the Christmas period to reduce the necessity of emergency supplies or same-day repeat prescriptions and reduce strain on all parts of primary care.
- Primary Care Seasonal Influenza Vaccination Programme and COVID-19 Vaccination Services
- Dental out-of-hours/urgent dental centres
- Urgent Care Centres, Minor Injury Units, Walk-In-Centres/Urgent Treatment Centres
- Local Primary Care Hub Services based on information provided by place team/GP Federation

We hope that this communication clarifies the commissioner's expectations of Primary Medical Care over the Christmas and New Year period. If you have any further questions, please contact the SWL Primary Care team (SWLICB.SWLPrimaryCare@nhs.net).

Thank you for your ongoing hard work and dedication to your patients through this very busy time.

Yours sincerely



Andrew McMylor
Director of Primary Care