

Delivering the early diagnosis of cancer PCN specification

Getting started and learning from others

The [NHS Long Term Plan's](#) ambition for early cancer diagnosis is that by 2028, the proportion of cancers diagnosed at stages 1 and 2 will rise from around half now to three-quarters of cancer patients. Achieving this will mean that from 2028, 55,000 more people each year will survive their cancer for at least five years after diagnosis.

Primary care has a vital role to play in delivering this ambition, and [Investment and Evolution](#), the full five-year framework for GP services in England, takes this on board. For 2020/21, both the (revised) quality and outcomes framework (QOF) quality improvement (QI) indicators on the early diagnosis of cancer and the early cancer diagnosis primary care network (PCN) specification recognise the pivotal role that GPs play in diagnosing cancer earlier, and focus on similar areas.

This joint briefing, prepared by Cancer Research UK and the PCN Network, aims to give an overview of the early diagnosis of cancer PCN specification and how it fits with the QOF quality improvement domain. It also signposts to free, evidence-based and practical resources from Cancer Research UK, highlights a case study on how to get started and provides top tips for PCNs.

Overview of the PCN DES requirements

The early cancer diagnosis specification for 2020/21 says PCNs will:

1. Improve referral processes for suspected cancers, with a focus on safety netting, ensuring that all patients receive information on their referral.
2. Contribute to improving local uptake of national cancer screening programmes, working with local system partners.
3. Support the delivery of points one and two through a community of practice which supports peer-to-peer learning events and engagement with local system partners.

In line with COVID-19 guidance issued in March 2020, the contractual start date for this work is now 1 October 2020, and the majority of networks are now commencing work in this respect.

QOF QI modules: duplication or complementary opportunities?

The revised QOF QI early diagnosis domain is focused on the restoration of delivery of screening services with a focus on cervical screening, and ensuring patients who require urgent referral are identified, supported and managed. Specifically:

- restoring cervical screening uptake to pre-COVID-19 levels
- building public confidence that general practice and other healthcare settings can be accessed safely
- returning referrals to pre-COVID-19 levels, including improving the quality of referrals; and awareness of referral and testing pathways
- having robust and consistent systems in place for safety netting.

PCNs should consider how they can maximise their collective impact on early diagnosis, over and above an individual practice. This could include:

- clinical leadership, coordination and avoiding duplication
- shared learning from individual practice QOF QI activities – the revised QOF guidance specifically suggests using learning event analysis (LEA)
- discussion regarding variation and building consensus on best practice – the revised QOF guidance specifically suggests sharing of best practice across the PCN, integrating quality improvement discussions into regular PCN meetings and understanding COVID-19-related inequalities at PCN level
- implementing best practice and holding each other to account
- operational economies of scale and shared primary care workforce.

Challenges faced by PCNs

Earlier in 2020, Cancer Research UK commissioned research with PCN clinical directors to understand the key challenges facing them. The charity was keen to understand attitudes towards the PCN specification on the early diagnosis of cancer and any progress made.

Unsurprisingly, the main challenges cited were regarding workload, lack of capacity and resources to deliver, different levels of PCN maturity, and managing the different needs across the PCN. Most were focused on recruitment or other PCN specifications and few had managed to get started with the early diagnosis specification.

Help is at hand

The good news is that help is at hand. Cancer Research UK is offering a range of free evidence-based, practical support and resources for PCNs, whatever their starting point.

GP contract hub

To support GPs in England deliver on the 2020/21 QOF QI module and the early cancer diagnosis specification, Cancer Research UK has developed free, [one-stop hub for GPs](#). It is quick and easy to access, with no need to register or sign in. The information summarises what GPs need to do and how to get started, including recommendations on what to do from Cancer Research UK GPs, who are themselves frontline GPs. With signposting to evidence-based practical resources, training and further support, Cancer Research UK is well placed to support GPs to complete the 2020/21 QOF QI module and the PCN specification on the early diagnosis of cancer.

Cancer Research UK facilitators

Cancer Research UK facilitators can help you to plan and deliver the requirements for your PCN, and offer free, tailored support to improve your referral process, increase screening uptake and deliver through a community of practice.

Your local Cancer Research UK facilitator can help you to review your PCN-level data and identify areas for improvement, agree the aims for your PCN and create an implementation plan. For further examples of the activity we can support with, please visit the [GP contract hub](#). To enquire about facilitator support in your area, contact us at facilitators@cancer.org.uk

Case study: Sowe Valley North and South PCN, Coventry – 11 GP practices, circa 80,000 population

The PCN clinical director contacted the West Midlands Cancer Research UK GP and local Cancer Research UK facilitators, as well as the sustainability and transformation partnership cancer lead to discuss how best to take the cancer early diagnosis PCN specification forward.

Building on a history of supporting primary care cancer GP education and support across Coventry, it was agreed to use personal medical services funding for a dedicated cancer clinical champion who could help lead the PCN's work on cancer early diagnosis. This clinical champion would undertake reviews with each practice and offer support and encouragement, review cancer data, review audit data and liaise with Cancer Research UK and the West Midlands Cancer Alliance.

A small working group met between April and June to review available PCN-level data and to identify best practice actions that could realistically be undertaken by PCN practices. The cancer PCN data and a draft SMART action plan were then shared with PCN practices at a meeting in July to gain their buy-in. This action plan identified support for all practices to improve their overall performance based on trends, and was not only focusing on outliers. Examples from the action plan include:

- three planning and shared learning events to be held between July 2020 and March 2021
- using PCN funding to cover time for practice clinical champions and non-clinical champions
- taking part in the national cancer diagnosis audit and promoting other targeted two-week waits audits
- improving the completeness and quality of two-week waits referral forms
- use of a standardised EMIS safety netting template by all practices
- PCN-wide standardisation of screening messages (invitation letters and text messages) to encourage patients to participate in cervical and bowel screening, along with targeted actions for non-responders

This process is only just starting and other ideas about possible interventions are also being developed. The intention is to begin delivery from October onwards.

Critical success factors include a shared sense of urgency, a single-minded focus on patient outcomes and support being provided to all member practices.

Cancer Research UK GPs' top ten tips

Cancer Research UK GPs are practising clinicians with expertise in cancer early diagnosis, who offer clinical leadership and wider primary care engagement on behalf of their regional cancer alliances. Some of these are also playing key roles within their own PCN. Collectively, they offer a number of '[top tips](#)':

- 1. You don't need to be an expert in cancer early diagnosis:** get to know the people who are, for example, clinical commissioning group cancer leads, Cancer Research UK facilitators, local public health teams, as they will have knowledge and will be able to point you in the right direction.
- 2. Don't try to do too much at once:** this is the first step in a multi-year programme. Link in with the QOF QI for cancer early diagnosis to avoid duplication of effort.
- 3. Know where the resources are** and don't feel you need to start anything from scratch.
- 4. Take a look at [Public Health England's Fingertips data](#)** to see where the practice and PCN's strengths and weaknesses are and where there is variation within a PCN – then explore why.
- 5. When auditing referrals or undertaking [learning event audits](#),** keep it focused, simple and relevant. Share any learning with the wider system, so everyone can benefit.
- 6. Make sure you know what is happening in the local and wider system** to avoid duplication. Link in with other PCNs in the locality to avoid working in silos and duplication.
- 7. Think bigger than local – think system and think change.** What we are ultimately trying to do together is support stage shift.
- 8. Link in with enthusiastic secondary care colleagues** who can add their expertise and create enhanced lines of communication with primary care.
- 9. Consider involving the PCN/practice patient participation group.**
- 10. Be creative with additional roles:** for example, social prescribers could get involved with screening promotion and are well placed to work with seldom-heard groups.

Webinar: Cancer Research UK GPs will be panel members on the forthcoming webinar hosted by the PCN Network and Cancer Research UK

When: Thursday 24 September at 12:30. [Book your place.](#)

About the PCN Network

The PCN Network has been established by the NHS Confederation to support primary care networks and ensure they are effectively represented within the health and care system.

Read more at www.nhsconfed.org/PCN-Network

About Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK (CRUK) is the world's largest independent cancer charity dedicated to saving lives through research. In 2019/20, we committed £468 million to research and £42 million on information, policy and communications outreach, including working with the NHS. Our health professional engagement work looks to support innovation, accelerate the implementation of best practice, and to reduce variation, in order to improve cancer outcomes. We support GPs, the wider primary care team and more recently Primary Care Networks, focusing on cancer prevention and early diagnosis. CRUK wants to accelerate progress so that three in four people survive their cancer for ten years or more by 2034.

Find out more at www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional

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