



Supporting Patient Participation Groups

July 2020

1. Summary

While some Greenwich PPGs are made up of active groups of patients, regularly in dialogue with GPs and practice staff on service developments, many more are little more than a mailing list with patients in receipt of an occasional update. These are sometimes called ‘virtual’ PPGs. Many practices struggled to keep PPGs running during Covid-19, but we did not always find evidence that PPGs were active before this.

Recruitment of PPG members is largely passive using posters in practice waiting areas and (limited) information on websites. As a result, nearly all PPGs struggle with recruitment. Most active¹ PPGs are made up of a handful of members - many of whom are elderly or retired. We did not find many examples of PPGs with members that reflect the patient population. Recruitment of younger patients (aged below 40), BAME patients, and those with long-term conditions or disabilities is a challenge.

Finding members with appropriate skills and good understanding of the role and remit of PPGs can be a problem. Some practices told us that a proportion of PPG members were reluctant to engage with issues outside of their personal health concerns and used PPG meetings to continually raise their own personal health needs. Others told us that a minority of PPG members inappropriately try to use PPG meetings and structures to lobby for their broader political views.

All practices are very positive about the potential of PPGs, but few have been able to realise these possibilities. Nearly all struggled to identify any examples of how their PPG had enhanced patient experience, service design or delivery. Indeed, several practices felt their PPG offered little value to the practice and simply added to staff workload.

¹ By active we mean PPGs that meet and have dialogue with each other and practice staff (physically or digitally) on a regular basis.

2. Introduction



All GP practices in England are required to have a Patient Participation Group (PPG) that reflects the patient population served by that practice. Generally, a PPG is a group of patients registered at the practice, who work together to support the practice to develop. However, beyond this, there is no specific requirement of what constitutes a PPG, what it can do, or how it should be organised².

All GP practices in England are covered by a Primary Care Network (PCN). Primary Care Networks are groups of neighbouring local practices that work together and share funds to offer a greater range of health and care services to their patients. Greenwich has six Primary Care Networks, Heritage, River Health, Eltham Health, Blackheath & Charlton, Greenwich West, and Unity³. There are opportunities for Patient Participation Groups to work with, inform, and influence new services being developed within Primary Care Networks. Indeed, if new approaches and services are to work for their local population, they need to be made with their local population.

In April 2020, we published our findings of a Greenwich GP website audit, assessing both the breadth and quality of information on practice websites. We found that not all practice websites provide PPG information. Of those that do, not all explain what a PPG is, how patients can join, when and how it meets, or what benefits it has brought to the practice and its patients.

Patient engagement is fundamental to the NHS. It is enshrined in the NHS Constitution⁴, and is a Key Performance Indicator⁵ (KPI). Taking every opportunity

²PPGs can:

- ✓ Be a critical friend to the practice
- ✓ Collect the views of those who use the practice
- ✓ Advise the practice on patient perspectives on services
- ✓ Organise health promotion events
- ✓ Encourage patients to take greater responsibility for their own and their family's health

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/south/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2016/09/ppg-introduction.pdf>

³ <https://www.greenwichccg.nhs.uk/Your-Health/Health-Services/Pages/Our-area.aspx#greenwich>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-nhs-constitution-for-england/the-nhs-constitution-for-england>

⁵ <https://www.cqc.org.uk/guidance-providers/healthcare/engagement-involvement-healthcare-services>

to listen to patients, encouraging active participation in shaping the way services are designed and delivered, ensures better understanding of what changes and improvements are a priority from a patient's perspective.

3. What difference will this report make?

Rapid and significant changes in how primary care is organised and delivered have happened because of Covid-19, with little, if any, patient consultation or engagement. Patient and public involvement is crucial for services as they restart post-Covid-19 to understand what is working well, and any barriers patients face accessing and using services. Active and effective PPGs offer an opportunity for practices to demonstrate they are meeting their contractual requirements and have a desire and interest in continuing to develop and improve services for patients, with patients.

Many services have now re-opened with a focus on encouraging those who need to use health and care services to do so. The post-Covid recovery period will embed, as standard procedure, many of the changes put in place to reduce the spread of Covid-19, such as increased digital access to primary care. As services re-start, the voice of patients in the development and implementation of services is needed more than ever. The value of patient involvement in service design is clear. The only way to understand what patients need from the services they use is by asking them. Patient engagement is crucial to improving the quality of care. We encourage practices in Greenwich, and NHS South East London Clinical Commissioning Group - Greenwich, to support the development of active Patient Participation Groups within and across Primary Care Networks.

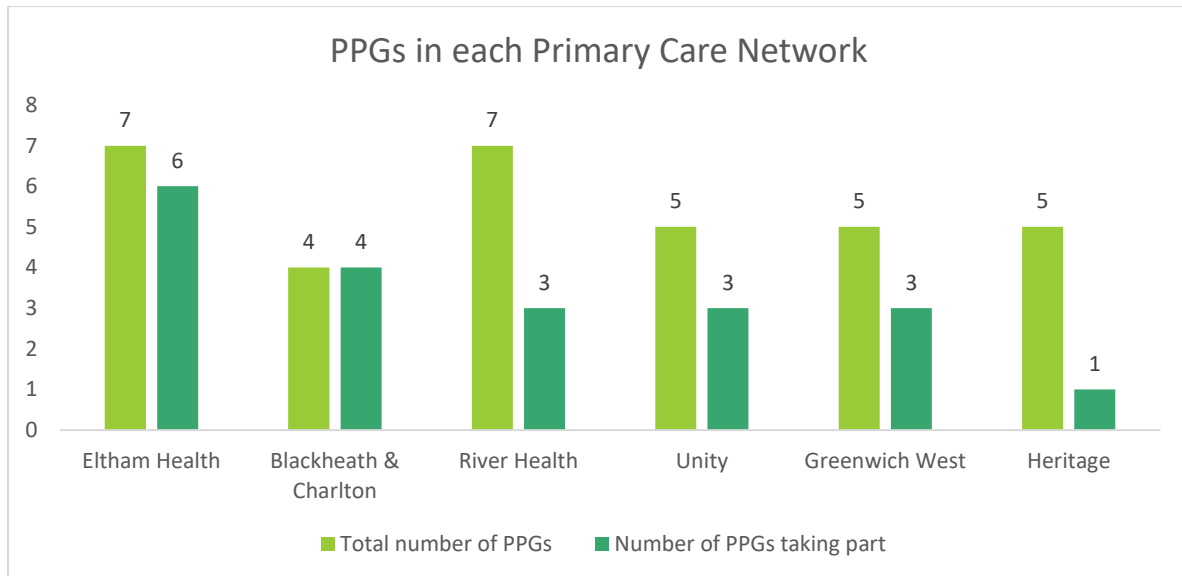
4. Objectives

Our project sought to speak to PPG leads in Greenwich and specifically to:

- Map the range of ways PPGs operate
- Understand where they are working well, and why
- Describe the challenges faced by PPGs

5. What did we do?

Using a list provided by NHS South East London Clinical Commissioning Group - Greenwich, between June and July, we contacted all 33 GP practices in Greenwich. 20 responded to our request⁶⁷.



Half of those we spoke to were practice staff with responsibility for their PPG and half were patient chairs or lead members of their PPG

Our semi-structured interviews included:

- How are patients recruited, and to what extent do PPG members reflect the patient population
- What guidelines are used, do PPG members understand their role and remit
- How do practices communicate with PPGs
- How many active⁸ members do PPGs have, and what form does this action take
- How did PPGs operate during the Coronavirus pandemic
- What benefits to the practice, or achievements, have PPGs delivered over the last year

⁶ See list of participating PPGs

⁷ See email to GPs in appendix

⁸ Active is defined as regularly taking part in meetings.

6. Limitations

Nearly two thirds of PPGs in Greenwich took part. As such, our findings are not a reflection of all PPGs in Greenwich.

Practice staff made up half of those we spoke to. We did ask to speak to patient PPG leads, but many practices were unable to put us in contact with the relevant person. In some cases the PPG was a loose network - without a defined patient chair or lead, in others, practices were unable to contact their patient PPG lead and give them our details, or patient leads were simply unavailable to speak to us. In addition, in some practices a member of staff (not a patient) leads the PPG group. As a result, much of what we heard came from practice staff, rather than patient members of PPGs. The views and experiences of patient PPG members may be very different from that of practice staff and we are not suggesting that our findings are representative of patient PPG leads or members.

7. What did we find out?

Heritage

There are five practices within Heritage PCN. We spoke to one Patient Participation Group chair/lead.

Patient Recruitment

Patient recruitment is largely passive. PPG information is displayed on noticeboards in the waiting rooms. Posters encourage interested patients to speak to reception to find out more. Dates of PPG meetings are not routinely circulated to non-members and notes or minutes of previous meetings are not easily available. Within the practice we spoke to, newly registered patients are sent an email including information regarding the PPG group and if they would like to join.

It was not clear how new patients who do not share their email address, those without an email address, and those who are not comfortable or fluent in English are told about the PPG.

We looked at PPG information provided by the five practices on their websites. All websites have an online and/or downloadable form or contact details to register

PPG interest. All but one listed previous PPG meeting minutes/reports, but these were often outdated. None of the websites detailed upcoming PPG meeting dates and most do not provide general explanatory information about their PPG.

Size and Representation

Membership of the PPG we spoke to varies between 5-15 patients. Most PPG members are aged over 40, with a significant proportion of retired people aged 60+. Membership includes a small number of patients from a range of ethnic backgrounds.

PPG meetings

The PPG we spoke to does not have a written term of reference outlining the objective and remit of the group. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the practice held face-to-face meetings four times a year⁹ with the date posted up in the waiting area a month in advance. With restrictions on social contact, the practice used email to keep in touch, but meetings have not restarted using digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom.

Benefits of PPGs

The practice we spoke to was unable to describe any achievements or meaningful input leading to benefits for the practice or the services offered. Suggestions put forward by their PPG included having a drinks dispenser in the waiting area and regularly updating posters.

Challenges

The PPG we spoke to struggled to recruit PPG members, acknowledging that existing membership, for the most part, did not reflect the patient population. There are no plans in place, or under discussion, to improve membership or engagement.

River Health

There are seven practices within River Health PCN. We spoke to chairs or leads for three Patient Participation Groups.

⁹ We were unable to obtain a copy of minutes of the last meeting.

Patient Recruitment

Two of the practices circulate PPG information quarterly by post, via their website, telephone calls, emails and leaflets or notices in waiting areas. One practice has PPG information on their website and invites new patients to join the PPG.

We looked at the websites for all seven practices in this PCN. Whilst they all include an online registration form and/or a downloadable form to be returned to reception, none provide information on upcoming dates, recent previous meeting minutes or Terms of reference. On the whole, websites provided very limited PPG information, with a single exception where we found 'Frequently Asked Questions' (FAQs), advantages of PPGs, and a description of how PPGs operate.

Size and Representation

PPGs have a range of 8-20 members and consist of patients 40 years and older. PPG members don't reflect the diversity of the patient population.

PPG meetings

The three PPGs we spoke to have written terms of reference setting out the remit of PPGs and the role of members¹⁰.

Prior to lockdown, two PPGs had face-to-face meetings four times a year whilst one practice would meet twice a year. With restrictions on social contact, one practice communicated with members via email but found there was no interest from its ten members to have digital meetings. Two PPGs have had no activity or contact with their practice during Covid-19.

Benefits of PPGs

Working with PPGs has resulted in a wide range of benefits for two practices such as:

- Improved signage
- Wider range of patient information in waiting rooms
- Patient newsletters

¹⁰ Whilst all PPGs in this area did have a written term of reference, we were only able to obtain a copy from one practice.

- Translation cards for non-English speakers
- Parking improvements

Some PPGs try to use their influence more widely, beyond their host practice, by commenting on borough and national consultations, and writing letters direct to their MPs.

One practice was unable to report positively or were uncertain of any benefits their PPG had facilitated.

Challenges

PPGs found it is difficult to recruit younger patients, patients from diverse backgrounds, and patients who understand the role and remit of PPGs. There are no plans in place, or under discussion, to improve membership or understanding of the role of PPGs.

Eltham Health

There are seven practices within Eltham Health PCN. We spoke to chairs or leads for six Patient Participation Groups.

Patient Recruitment

PPG information is provided in practice waiting areas, on websites, and sign-up forms are available at reception. One practice contacts new patients via email telling them about the PPG and encouraging them to join.

It was not clear how new patients who do not share their email address, those without an email address, and those who are not comfortable or fluent in English are told about the PPG.

We looked at all seven websites for the practices in this PCN area. We did not find information on upcoming PPG meeting dates, terms of reference or recent meetings minutes. All provide an online PPG registration form, but only one included good information on what a PPG is, including an NHS video.

Size and Representation

PPG membership ranges between 2-12 patients. Most PPG members are retired, and PPGs do not reflect the patient population. However, membership does include a small number of working patients and carers.

PPG meetings

All PPGs have a written term of reference¹¹. Prior to lockdown, one PPG met quarterly, with members unable to attend receiving email or hardcopies of meeting minutes by post¹². This PPG has digital meetings using only the audio function when having video meetings. Another practice is considering digital meetings. Other PPGs have been dormant since Covid, and at least one has not met in over two years.

Benefits of PPGs

A small number of practices were able to identify areas where PPGs had been of assistance such as building refurbishment and decorating plans, and input into repeat prescription systems. However, most practices had difficulty in describing any benefit of having a PPG apart from feedback from PPG members who enjoy taking part.

Challenges

All PPGs have difficulty in recruiting members from diverse backgrounds, younger patient members, and finding ways to keep PPGs active while social distancing measures are in place. There are no plans in place, or under discussion, to improve membership or engagement.

Blackheath & Charlton

There are four practices within Blackheath and Charlton PCN. We spoke to chairs or leads for all four Patient Participation Groups.

¹¹ Although all PPGs told us they have a written term of reference, we were unable to obtain a copy.

¹² We were unable to obtain a copy.

Patient Recruitment

PPG information is distributed through leaflets, practice websites, forms in the waiting room, email, and by speaking to the receptionist. In addition, one practice encouraged GPs to tell patients about the PPG and identify potential interest.

We looked at the websites for all four practices. All but one offers information on how to join the PPG, however, the link to the registration form on one site was invalid. Upcoming meetings dates and terms of reference are not available. Two websites included previous meeting minutes/survey results or PPG newsletters, but all were out of date.

Size and Representation

PPG membership ranges from 12 to 20 patients (those who physically met, pre-Covid). Virtual PPG membership ranges from 20-200+ who all receive information rather than take part in a digital meeting. Membership includes younger and retired members, but most are aged between 40-90, with an emphasis on an older age group. Only one PPG confirmed their members include patients with disabilities, and those from a range of ethnic groups.

PPG meetings

PPGs do not have a written term of reference. PPGs have been dormant during Covid-19 and no (digital) meetings have taken place. Practices share information (quarterly or more frequently), via email or text, but no dialogue with PPG members is facilitated.

Benefits of PPGs

Most practices have seen no benefit at all. One practice told us their PPG had been responsible for improvements to the waiting area such as a suggestion board, and enhanced patient confidentiality by playing music in the practice.

Challenges

Most PPGs find it difficult to recruit younger patients, with the suggestion (from one PPG) that younger patients simply don't have the time. PPGs find it difficult to keep

members interested and engagement is generally poor. There are no plans in place, or under discussion, to improve membership or engagement.

Greenwich West

There are five practices within Greenwich West PCN. We spoke to chairs or leads for three Patient Participation Groups.

Patient Recruitment

PPG information is shared on websites and notice boards in waiting areas. One PPG sends general information via text messages quarterly. All newly registered patients are asked if they would like to join the PPG when registering to the practice.

We looked at all five practice websites. PPG information is limited. All but one provides information about how to join PPG, and only one listed upcoming PPG meeting dates for 2020. Some include meeting minutes/reports, but these have not been kept up to date.

Size and Representation

PPG membership ranges between 2 - 8 patients. Most PPG members are retired and/or elderly.

PPG meetings

The two practices we spoke to have a terms of reference for their PPGs, however we were unable to obtain a copy. Prior to Covid-19, PPGs held quarterly face-to-face meetings. One PPG now operates digitally via online meetings and sharing information via email whilst the other practice is considering digital meetings. To increase dialogue and engagement, one practice is discussing the potential of a PPG Facebook page. However, not all PPG members are keen on being online and not all are knowledgeable about technology.

Benefits of PPGs

One practice identified getting feedback on e-consult and other online services as a benefit of having a PPG. The other practice struggled to identify any benefits of having a PPG.

Challenges

Both practices are keen to try to engage and recruit younger and newly registered patients for their PPG. Both had been unsuccessful. There are no plans in place, or under discussion, to improve membership or engagement.

Unity

There are five practices within Unity PCN. We spoke to chairs or leads for three Patient Participation Groups.

Patient Recruitment

PPG information is provided on practice websites. In addition, patients can speak to reception and complete a form.

We looked at all five websites. Information on PPGs are limited. One practice does not have a website, as such, there is no PPG information available. Four websites offer online registration forms, but no information on upcoming PPG meeting dates or terms of reference. One website provides previous PPG meeting minutes/reports, but this has not been kept up to date.

Size and Representation

PPG membership ranges between 6-16 members. Most PPG members are aged 60+. PPG members come from a range of diverse backgrounds. Overall, PPGs do not reflect the patient population.

PPG meetings

Only one of the PPGs we spoke to has a terms of reference¹³. Pre-Covid, PPGs met between twice and four times a year. All PPGs have been dormant since Covid. One PPG offered digital meetings but acknowledges that most of their PPG members are digitally disengaged, having either little knowledge or interest in online activity.

¹³ We were unable to obtain a copy.

Benefits of PPGs

Two of the three PPGs we spoke to struggled to identify any benefits for the practice. One PPG suggested minor assistance in letting practice staff know when notices and information in waiting areas became out of date and needed to be removed or refreshed, reducing clutter on notice boards.

Challenges

All PPGs have difficulty in recruiting younger patient members and patients from diverse backgrounds. There are no plans in place, or under discussion, to improve membership or engagement.

8. Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Greater support to develop PPGs - patient members and practice staff.

The purpose of PPGs is to add value to the practice, improve patient experience and outcomes as a result of dialogue and insight. Despite many PPGs having terms of reference, patient members we spoke to were often unclear about the purpose and remit of their PPG. Some felt their contribution was to simply comment on administrative topics whereas others felt the role of the PPG is to encompass wider regional, national and Government health and care policy. In addition, not all of the practice staff we spoke to were able to articulate the scope or objective of their PPG, beyond it being a contractual requirement. Indeed, there was some confusion over who should be responsible for, and lead, the PPG - patients or the practice. It is clear how these different interpretations between PPG members and between practice staff can lead to frustration and poor PPG output.

Practices within each PCN, must support PPG members, and practice staff, through increased clarity on the role of PPGs and training to enable both PPG members and practice staff to understand, and work within, expectations.

Recommendation 2: Actively recruit PPG members that reflect the patient population.

All practices find it difficult to recruit patients and none have an active recruitment plan. Recruitment is overwhelmingly passive consisting of leaflets and posters in practices, providing (limited) PPG information on websites, and speaking to the reception staff. As a result, most PPGs do not reflect the patient population.

Practices within each PCN, working with Healthwatch Greenwich, should use an asset-based approach to map and actively reach out and work with existing formal and informal community and resident groups. Working at PCN level could reduce the overall burden on individual practices and increase sustainability.

Recommendation 3: Re-start PPG meetings using on-line platforms or conference call facilities.

It may be years before a vaccine is available and social distancing rules are completely relaxed to allow face-to-face PPG meetings. In the meantime, post-Covid recovery plans and changes to services, originally put in place as emergency measures, are being embedded as the 'new normal'. It is critical to gather patient views and insight on these changes and to assess how well they are working. PPG meetings should restart as a matter of urgency using on-line platforms or conference call facilities to ensure those without a laptop or computer are not excluded.

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Greenwich would like to thank Greenwich practices, practice staff, and PPG leads for sharing their views and experience with us. We'd like to thank our volunteer Alyssa Miranda who has been responsible for much of the data collection and success in bringing this report to fruition.

9. Provider Response

Commissioners, service providers and key stakeholders are given the opportunity to review our reports prior to publication, to check for factual accuracy and to provide a response if required. We did not receive a response to our recommendations from any of the providers at time of publication.

Additionally, a few GPs that we had previously been unavailable at the time we were carrying out our project, provided some information about their PPGs:

Valentine Health Partnership, Clinical Assistant and Practice Development Officer

We are one of the most active PPG's in Greenwich and prior to Covid our PPG met once per month for 3 hours. We have an active PPG with approximately 12 members.

Burney Street, Practice Manager

Challenges we have had with our PPG is not having a representative group for our practice area (members tend to be white British aged 50-80). We have a core group of patients (approximately 10-15) who attend our quarterly meetings which pre-COVID we held at 6pm on Wednesdays every three months at the practice. If we receive patient feedback or complaints, I tended to invite them to join our PPG to help improve our services. Staff also would actively nominate staff. All new patients are asked within their registrations forms if they would like to join our PPG.

10. Appendices

Appendix 1: List of participating PPGs by PCN

Heritage

- Abbeyslade PMS

River Health

- Gallions Reach Health Centre
- Thamesmead Health Centre
- St Marks PMS

Eltham Health

- Eltham Palace Surgery
- Sherard Rd Medical Centre
- New Eltham & Blackfen Medical Centre
- Eltham Park Surgery
- Coldharbour Surgery
- Elmstead

Blackheath & Charlton

- Vanbrugh Group Practice
- Manor Brook Medical Practice
- Fairfield PMS
- Blackheath Standard Surgery

Greenwich West

- Blackheath PMS
- Plumbridge Medical Centre
- Greenwich Peninsula Practice

Unity

- All Saints Medical Centre
- Plumstead Health Centre
- Glyndon PMS

11. Contact us

Address: Gunnery House, Gunnery Terrace, Woolwich, London SE18 6SW
Telephone: 020 8301 8340
Email: info@healthwatchgreenwich.co.uk
Website: www.healthwatchgreenwich.co.uk Twitter: @HWGreenwich

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