Online Consultation Update

This paper aims to provide a progress report update, on the implementation of Online Consultation in Hounslow. Since presenting the previous online consultation paper in February 2020, the committee is asked to note developments and assess current position, learning and recommendations.

Background and Local Context

North West London comprises of eight Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), serving a population of 2.5 million registered patients. The online consultation procurement process was divided into three waves. Hounslow was aligned to wave 3, which commenced on 5th February 2020.

Wave 3 of procurement included Central London, Hounslow and West London CCGs, with a joint population of 440,000 registered patients, covering 76 GP practices. Nearly all the practices work collaboratively with North West London. In addition, Extended Access GP services have been commissioned in each of the CCGs. It is important to note that online consultations will not be replacing existing forms of GP access but giving patients the opportunity to seek medical help in a different way.

Online consultation is expected to further enhance the digital offering across Central London, Hounslow and West London CCGs; there is an ambition to provide patient facing digital services to the population that it serves. Through the use of technology patients of Central London, Hounslow and West London CCGs will be able to access key information to manage their health and wellbeing proactively, reduce avoidable appointments. This will enable patients to access services from the most appropriate care setting, communicate with health and care professionals in a more efficient way.

In addition to providing population with the tools to access health and care services online. This is a long-term change to a more sustainable way of working to address some of the issues around workforce and increase workload to meet demand.

As practices have significantly reduced their face to face appointment during COVID-19, eConsult was seen as a helpful solution to assist practice to manage and triage patient request, as well as reduce phone calls and face to face appointment. The key asset of eConsult is that the GP will have a full overview of patient request to assess how best to triage. Most eConsults request can be closed without a follow up phone call or video consultation. It also has a red flag system to redirect emergency request to 111 or 999.

Procurement Process

Shortly after wave 3 procurement commenced, we were hit by the impact of COVID-19 in early March. In response to COVID-19, all practices were urged by NHSE to triage all patient contact to reduce the risk face to face contact. The procurement was put on hold and Hounslow CCG was advised to go with the winner of wave 1 and 2. A contract for six months was signed, with the option to extend for another six months or to reopen procurement.

NWL Digital first team are currently seeking advice from the national procurement team to establish if they are required to endorse reopening the procurement or suggest an extension for another 6 months. NWL Digital first team is seeking clarification to ensure wave 3 procurement process is not open to challenge. The advice from the Digital first team is that they recommend Hounslow extend the contract for another 6 months, whereby Hounslow would benefit from reduced price of 14 p per patient, for the next 6 months. Hounslow is currently paying 30 p per patient. This will help Hounslow to reallocate savings to support cost of roll out.

If the national procurement team advise all the members in wave 3 to reopen the procurement, Hounslow will follow their advice and have assurance that the procurement cost would be covered. However if Hounslow decides to reopen the procurement, of their own accord, they would be acting on their own and will have to cover the cost of procurement. It is worth mentioning that for the current financial envelope of 30p max per patient, the outcome is likely to be the same, as eConsult is the only provider on the market who can deliver on the NWL specification and have agreement to use NHS App for price threshold. As Hounslow move to one CCG model it would not be prudent for Hounslow to procure a different provider. Hounslow will lose out on the shared financial benefits of working with 7 CCGS and will miss out on IT and system change support from NWL central team.
Hounslow is still in the roll out phase, with 40 out of 46 practices live. It is recommended that Hounslow use the next 6 months of this fully funded programme as a trial period to establish what features works best at a local level. Implementing online consultation can be a major change to work routine and culture shift. Also reopening procurement may cause a break in service, lose time and delay in patient engagement. The following areas need to be considered in order to have a full evaluation of product:

- Address workload and capacity to restructure work routine
- Look at an inclusion approach
- Accessibility for both patients and workforce
- Review workflow
- Effective triage
- Review patient and general practice feedback
- Engage with provider to address integration and product development

NWL have supported Hounslow to deliver training and webinars to engage practices for shared learning and product development. NHS National team also provided general practice with additional laptops, webcams, remote access and headset to support new ways of working during rapid roll of online consultation, in response to COVID-19.

**Definition of Online Consultation**

Online consultation systems supports the total triage approach and enables patients to contact their general practice online in a structured way, regarding the wide range of queries, requests and issues that patients usually need support with from their practice, e.g. administrative requests, clinical queries or condition management. The system will support the practice to triage these incoming contacts from patients, including the ability to flag urgent requests, to easily signpost patients to the most appropriate service, to distribute requests to team members and to include data in the patient record with minimal manual burden.

The system will include:

- Capability for a patient to make a request to (their registered) general practice online. There should be capability for the practice to support non-digital users to go through the same process to make their request, either over the phone or in-person, as well as for parents/nominated proxy to submit an online consultation on behalf of the patient. The process should capture relevant information about the patient's request, symptoms or issue via a structured format
- The request must either go through a validated automated triage process or arrive at the practice such that the practice can then easily sort and triage the requests, and then pass them to an appropriate member of the team to respond to
- The data submitted by the patient must be presented to the practice in a way that is easy for the practice to review, respond to and transfer into the patient record with minimal manual burden.
- Ideally there would be a two way digital engagement channel that enables the practice to securely respond to the patient via the same online system. However, some systems do not support this and so practices use other tools to respond to the request (e.g. text, phone, video)
- The system must include signposting to validated self-care advice (e.g. nhs.uk)
- The system must enable capture of outcome data to support service improvement

**Hounslow Model**

Hounslow are keen to facilitate standalone model and e-hub model. Standalone model allows practices with capacity to manage their own online consultation, whereby e – hub model allow practices to work collaboratively at a Primary Care Network or borough level to share resources and workforce. Over the next phase the CCG will be engaging with practices and CD to develop an eHub model.

Please see ehub model information in separate document.

**Next steps**

Now that practices have had four months to familiarise themselves the online consultation. Some practices have begun to proactively engage with patients. CCG would like to rollout patient engagement to improve utilisation and raise patient awareness of how to use the product and benefits. It also important to reassure
patients that digital literacy, accessibility and maturity are key considerations. Online consultation is not to replace face to face appointment, but an option for those feel able to use online consultation. Enabling online consultation frees up telephone access and face to face appointments for more vulnerable patients who are not digitally literate.

Patient engagement strategy will include:

- How to use online system, why and what to expect
- What to do in an emergency
- Service hours and response times
- How to get help out of hours
- What “happens behind the scenes”
- Reassure patients the system enables them to get a response from clinician when they need one and is secure
- Acknowledge patient requests and let them know it is being actioned
- Explain that the mode of response is personalised to the patient’s need