



NHS England – North Midlands  
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Dear Colleague

**Winter Plans and Arrangements for Primary Medical Care Services during the Christmas and New Year Period**

As we know, last winter was challenging for the NHS, however, with thanks to the huge efforts of frontline primary care staff, more people were seen in primary care than the previous year.

As you will be aware, Local A&E Delivery Boards are responsible for developing plans to ensure that there is sufficient capacity across the system to manage the expected surge in demand over the winter period, including Christmas and New Year.

Primary Care Services play a fundamental role in managing winter demands as part of the wider health and care system which has many interdependent services. It is important that each part of the system plays its specific role in order to minimise undue pressures on any one part of the system.

In order to help address winter pressures, NHS England has brought forward plans to ensure everyone has easier and more convenient access to extended general practice services, with appointments in the evenings and at weekends. CCGs will have put in place services that deliver pre bookable and same day appointments by 1<sup>st</sup> October 2018. The intention is this additional access to general practice services should help to relieve pressure in primary care as well as the wider health care system and will be made available during peak times of demand, such as bank holidays. Services will be widely advertised and we are asking practices to help by signposting patients to the appropriate services to ensure they receive the right care, in the right place, at the right time. This will include the local extended access service in your areas.

As the commissioners of Primary Care Services, NHS England and CCGs have responsibility to ensure patients have confidence in the availability of primary care services, including Primary Medical, Dental and Community Pharmacy, over the Christmas and New Year period. The expectations of Primary Medical Care over this period are as follows:

**Christmas and New Year's Eve:**

In the run up to Christmas and New Year's Eve, Monday 24<sup>th</sup> and Monday 31<sup>st</sup> December 2018 are **normal working days**. All our partner health and social care agencies are working on this basis. The expectation is that practices will be open at full capacity from 08:00 to 18:30 hrs and will take telephone calls throughout this period (unless alternative arrangements, as described in Appendix A, are agreed in advance with your NHS England local office/CCG.) Practices are reminded that transferring calls to 111 services during normal working hours is not appropriate due to the unnecessary pressure this places on other services.

Those practices that provide **Extended Hours** on these days **under the Directed Enhanced Service (DES)** may wish to request a move of these hours to another day within the Christmas and New Year period to help meet any winter surge demand. Such requests will be checked by the CCG to ensure the plans align with the broader Local A&E Delivery Board plans for this period.

We would also like to remind practices of the importance to ensure there is capacity and availability to deal with same day repeat prescriptions in order to prevent patients presenting on Christmas Eve having to wait four days to collect their prescription.

**Weekends over Christmas and New Year:**

Those practices that provide Extended Hours (DES) over the weekend on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and/or 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2018 and 29<sup>th</sup>/30<sup>th</sup> December 2018 may again wish to request a move of these hours to another day within the Christmas and New Year period. The principles as outlined for Christmas and New Year's Eve apply.

**Bank Holidays:**

Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> and Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> December 2018 and Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019 are bank holidays and **normal bank holiday arrangements** should be in place to ensure that patients can access primary medical care during this period. These arrangements may be supplemented by specific Local A&E Delivery Board led initiatives (e.g. GP at A&E) to help manage the expected surge in demand over this period.

Again, those practices that would normally provide Extended Hours (DES) on these days of the week may wish to request a move of these hours to another day within the Christmas and New Year period to help manage demand.

**Sharing Information:**

If Extended Hours (DES) sessions need to be changed due to falling on one of the days listed above, please consider how patients will be informed in advance by the practice, by utilising patient communications and the practice website.

It would also be beneficial for practices to hold information for sign posting to other local primary care services over the holiday period, including considering links on the practice websites, such as:

- Dental out of hours
- Community pharmacy provision, including any minor ailment and urgent medicine supply services, if applicable
- Urgent Care Centres, Minor Injury Units, Walk-In-Centres/Urgent Treatment Centres
- Local Extended Access Services
- Any additional CCG commissioned capacity/activity, if applicable.

We hope that this communication provides clarity in relation to commissioner expectations of Primary Medical Care over the Christmas and New Year period. If there are any questions please contact the NHS England local office contracting team at [ENGLAND.RugeleyPrimaryCare@nhs.net](mailto:ENGLAND.RugeleyPrimaryCare@nhs.net)

OFFICIAL

Thank you for your continued support, hard work and commitment to providing high quality and safe services to NHS patients.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "R Woods". The signature is written in a cursive style with a period at the end.

**Rebecca Woods**  
**Head of Primary Care**  
**NHS England**

## Appendix A: Contractual considerations for practices

If you plan any changes during Core Hours (08:00-18:30 hrs Monday to Friday, excluding Bank Holidays) over the holiday period, you will need to confirm what arrangements are in place to deliver the contractual obligations.

Whilst the GMS Contract Regulations regarding the provision of essential and additional services during “core hours” is not a “doors open” requirement, these provisions do impose a contractual responsibility on the Contractor for patient care during this period.

This means that the practice retains responsibility for ensuring that the care provided during core hours is appropriate to meet the reasonable needs of your patients. It is not acceptable to close the doors and rely on an answer machine message advising patients to contact another provider where no prior arrangements have been made (e.g. contact 111 or attend A&E).

If the practice is planning to close during core hours, then patients need to have clarity about how to access services. As a minimum, you will need to have a system in place so that patients can access the services listed below. These services have been distilled following engagement with patient groups and patient representatives so whilst not explicit in the contract these represent in broad terms the types of services that we expect will be in place to meet the reasonable needs of your patients:

- Ability to attend a pre-bookable appointment (face to face)
- Ability to book/cancel appointments
- Ability to collect/order a prescription
- Access urgent appointments/advice as clinically necessary
- Home visit (where clinically necessary)
- Ring for telephone advice
- Ability to be referred to other services where clinically urgent (including for example suspected cancer)
- Ability to access urgent diagnostics and take action in relation to urgent results.

These will be accessible either by ringing the surgery and:

1. Being able to talk directly to a clinician to ascertain how they can access services if they need to;
2. An answer-phone message signposting the patient to an on-call GP service for the practice.

If the on-call GP service arrangement is part of a service commissioned by the CCG (e.g. using the OOH service in-hours) then this must be with prior written agreement with both the provider and the CCG commissioner of that service.

In addition the Contract Regulations require a practice to notify their commissioner of their proposal to sub-contract. Where this is the case the commissioner will need to be assured that such an arrangement will deliver essential medical services during core hours. This notification should be made at least 28 days prior to the commencement of the sub-contract.

Providers of urgent and emergency care, including GP OOHs, have previously expressed concern about early closing of general practices at Christmas and New Year and the potential impact on them. Given the pressures that the urgent and emergency care system already faces during this period, this may not be a reasonable or sustainable service option.

In summary practices are expected to be open from 08:00 to 18:30 hrs, Monday to Friday excluding bank holidays, unless alternative arrangements are notified in advance. If these arrangements are not in place, or if tested they fail, this may amount to a breach of your contract.

**Appendix B – preparation checklist for Christmas and New Year period**

<b>Task</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Completed</b>
1. Plans are in place to ensure the identification of high risk community based patients and to profile their care management over the extended holiday period appropriately.		
2. Email/fax is operational throughout.		
3. The telephone divert arrangements are updated for holidays and a staff member is contactable/scheduled to check that the phones are still working properly over the course of the Christmas and New year weekend and bank holiday periods and can remedy any faults/issues if needed.		
4. Third party call handling divert arrangements are updated – where used and are successfully operational.		
5. Ensure that any changes to access times are clearly advertised on NHS Choices/practice website/in practice. If the practice uses a pre-recorded message when patients telephone, you may wish to consider using this to remind patients about changes for the holiday period.		
6. In the weeks before the BH period, highlight to patients the need to plan for sufficient repeat medication to cover them for the BH period. Information to patients could include pharmacy opening times over the Christmas period.		
7. Check Business Continuity Plans are up-to-date, particularly ensuring that contact details for local health organisations are correct.		
8. Any changes to Extended Hours DES are advertised in practice in advance.		
9. Have all staff been offered flu vaccine.		
10. Are plans in place to cover last minute sickness/absence.		