



NHS Hounslow — Working together for better patient care

In November 2010, Optum[®] was awarded the contract to provide a referral facilitation service (RFS) for NHS Hounslow Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). The RFS is the first point for healthcare professionals such as GPs, nurses and hospital consultants when making an outpatient referral.

The programme objectives were to achieve:

- Centralised referral management
- Clinical assessment of referrals against agreed guidelines
- Centralised tracking and reporting of referral data
- Promotion of the service to GPs and support for change in practice
- Positive outcomes through the refinement of care pathways

The demographic and health profile of NHS Hounslow is very similar to London as a whole, but there are some health and socio-economic challenges — meaning that the average life expectancy is one year lower than the average Londoner. The population is approximately 305,626 with a black and ethnic minority population of around 36 percent. NHS Hounslow commissions services from West Middlesex University Hospital, Imperial College Healthcare, and Ashford and St. Peter's Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

High variation of referral practices in Hounslow and year-on-year growth in outpatient referrals meant that it was becoming increasingly unaffordable to sustain increased dependency on acute hospital services and manage a reduced planned care budget.

Partnering for an effective solution

Optum has been supporting Hounslow CCG and NHS Hounslow, to develop a locally designed RFS aimed at facilitating the whole of the patient pathway from the GP to the healthcare provider, making best use of care that is available for the population. Patient engagement and involvement throughout the whole process was key to ensuring a timely and responsive service to meet patients' needs. The service was driven and designed by local GPs, for local GPs. The RFS supports Hounslow practices with local GP-led referral management and advice, patient-assisted NHS eReferral utilisation and service provider advice to general practice. Algorithms and locally designed clinical guidelines have been used to support clinical triage by local GPs which has facilitated the sharing of best practice, peer-to-peer education and learning between referrers.

"I have always found the referral service staff to be polite and helpful whether for myself or my children's bookings. This service is very good to have, thank you."

NHS Hounslow patient feedback

Central to the programme is regular and timely engagement with GPs and other key stakeholders. We have designated staff to communicate and work with local practice staff including nurses, community matrons and GPs to promote the value of the programme to drive optimal use of the service.

We also provide centralised tracking and data management delivered by Optum technology. This technology provides detailed data and information about referral behaviour and activity levels. This supports NHS Hounslow with the information required to manage demand in the acute trusts and evidence for conversations with providers.

Impact of the service

The service has delivered numerous benefits for patients, GPs and the Hounslow CCG, including:

- Service from 8am to 8pm, five days a week, offering a central point of contact for any patient who has an enquiry about their referral or hospital appointment; the patient can also change their hospital appointment time, if it's available, using the NHS eReferral system
- Consistent achievement of four-hour turnaround for cancer referrals and a two-day turnaround for all urgent and routine referrals
- Increased quality of information and data about Hounslow patients and the usage of secondary and community care services
- Increased quality of referral letters, standardising the referral process and adherence to local guidelines
- Increased treatment options for patients
- Telephonic support for vulnerable patients in the appointment-setting process
- Assistance is offered to patients with extra needs when booking via NHS eReferral and booking hospital transport
- Reduced day-to-day administrative burden for referring practices as they now only have one central referral point and patient referral queries are dealt with by the RFS
- Feedback on referral patterns and the sharing of good practice amongst GPs — leading to reduced variation in referral practices
- Implementation of the GP education plan to reduce errors in referrals that lead to delays in patient care
- Supporting local peer support network for practices called Mentoring Cells via provision of data information on practice referral patterns
- Managing referrals appropriately in the first instance is better for the patient and has helped lower Hounslow CCG's acute activity costs by avoiding inappropriate referrals to hospital

Future plans

Hounslow CCG and the RFS work together to:

- Increase the number of referrals that are triaged by local GPs within the service and add additional clinical specialties
- Develop and appraise GP triagers to ensure consistent and agreed triaging protocols are followed
- Increase the number of internally generated referrals by working with secondary care providers and the Commissioning Support Units (CSUs) to build in the RFS process within acute contracts
- Update and develop further guidelines to support GP triage and primary care decision-making
- Continue to support general practice through regular visits
- Continue to support GP mentoring cells with accurate and timely reported referral data

Providing excellent GP, practice staff and patient experience

GP and practice staff satisfaction surveys indicate agreement that the service has made a positive difference in providing a good service for patients, reducing telephone queries by patients and increasing the use of NHS eReferral.

87%

of patients happy with the way their appointment was made.