

## The Hounslow Referral Facilitation Service



### **Working together for better patient care** **Background**

In November 2010, Optum was awarded the contract to provide a Referral Facilitation Service for NHS Hounslow Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). The Referral Facilitation Service is the first point for professionals such as GP and hospital consultants when making an outpatient referral. The programme objectives are 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 249,740 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.

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*"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."*

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## Partnering for effective solution

Optum has been working in partnership with Hounslow Clinical Commissioning Group (HCCG) and NHS Hounslow, to develop a locally designed Referral Facilitation Service (RFS) aimed at facilitating the whole of the patient pathway from the GP to the health care provider, making best use of care that is available for the population. Patient engagement and involvement throughout the whole process was key to ensuring that a timely and responsive service was developed 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 Choose and Book utilization, 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.

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 behavior and activity levels. This provides 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, Hounslow Clinical Commissioning Group, including:

- 8a.m. to 8.p.m., five days a week service a week service, offering a central point of contact for any patient who has an enquiry about their referral or hospital appointment. Also includes the option to change hospital appointment times when available on Choose and Book 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
- Patients who have been identified as having extra needs are offered assistance when booking via Choose and Book, and booking hospital transport
- Reduced day-to administrative burden for referring practice as they now only have on 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
- Referrals are sent to the most appropriate place the first time, which is better for the patient and helped lower acute activity costs to HCCG since referrals are not inappropriately sent to hospital

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87% of patients were happy with the way their appointment was made.

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## Future plans

In the next year, Hounslow Clinical Commissioning Group and the RFS will 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.
- Increased the number of internally generated referrals (C2C) by working with secondary care providers and the Commissioning Support Unit (CSU) 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 practices through regular visits.
- Continue to support GP mentoring cells with accurate and timely reported referral data.

## Results

- GP practice staff satisfaction surveys indicate there is an 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 Choose and Book.
- 87% of patients were happy with the way their appointment was made

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“I think you provide a very good service.”

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