NOVEL CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

PRIMARY MEDICAL CARE COMMISSIONING GUIDANCE

MANAGING GP PRACTICE REQUESTS TO SUSPEND ONLINE BOOKING OF APPOINTMENTS

This guidance advises commissioners on the process for managing GP practice requests to suspend online booking of appointments which has been identified as a possible mitigating action to manage infection risk of novel coronavirus (COVID-19). A national suspension of online booking is **not** in place. NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSEI) however recognise risks can present rapidly, and these would be seen locally first. NHSEI supports local decision making on the management of online booking as a means of mitigating COVID-19 infection risks in response to local circumstances. Management in this context means:

1. **GP practices switching online booking to triage appointments delivered remotely.** Rather than seek to suspend online booking, where there are specific concerns about infection risks GP practices are advised to change face to face appointments offered for online booking to triage appointments. These triage appointments can then be offered via telephone or video so that the patient does not have to attend in person at the practice. The triage process will support the management of infection risk and allow patients to be given appropriate advice and support, including a follow-up face to face appointment if needed. Switching to remote appointments should be supported by clear communications so patients know they are booking a telephone or video appointment rather than a face-to-face appointment.

2. **GP practices promoting online consultation services.** In addition to changing the mode of appointments available for online booking, practices can promote online consultation services to patients where these are in place so that patients can obtain advice and support from their practice without attending in person. As part of business continuity planning, online consultation systems can also be part of the solution in combatting potential capacity issues by enabling staff to work remotely. Practice resources are available to support implementation of online consultation systems:

    - Full toolkit: https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/online-consultations-implementation-toolkit-v1.1-updated.pdf
    - Summary toolkit for practices: https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/online-consultations-summary-tocolkit-for-practices-dec-2019.pdf

If a practice still feels that suspension of online appointment booking is necessary, the next step should be followed.

3. **Suspension of online booking with commissioner agreement**. Suspension would normally warrant contractual management and therefore:

a. GP practice(s) should raise specific concerns as early as possible with their local commissioner (and normally in advance of any suspension).
b. Commissioners should assess concerns raised quickly and robustly. An initial discussion may be able to reassure practice concerns; advise a switch to remote appointments; or identify the need for a risk assessment.
c. Risk assessment should consider specific issues that have presented locally to identify if these materially raise the risk of non-containment of COVID-19 infection. This may include the following factors:

- The effectiveness of GP practice online booking system (e.g. display of 111 message, using of 'reason for the appointment' field, using for triage appointments etc.)
- Confirmation that a cluster of the practices registered population is in (or could shortly be in) self-isolation and who present a risk of attending (this could include consideration of patient demographics).
- Identification of confirmed cases locally and neighbouring GP/Community pharmacy closures arising from decontamination / related COVID-19 isolation/illness procedures.
- Local Health Protection Unit advice.
- Practice plans for managing patient access to appointments should online booking be suspended (and possible unintended consequences such as risk of increased footfall/telephone demand).
- Whether risk is presenting at a practice specific or wider footprint (e.g. practice, PCN or CCG-wide)

d. Commissioners are advised to contact their local resilience forum as part of this process to support assessment of risk and consider any wider consequences that suspension of online booking may present.
e. Any suspension of online would normally be for a defined period, to be determined locally in response to local circumstances.
f. Commissioners will recognise GPs have a professional duty to protect their patients and GP practices also have duties as an employer to protect their staff. **This means GP practices acting reasonably and rationally in response to a real or perceived risk locally may act to suspend their online booking in lieu of commissioner assessment/approval and without concern of contractual performance action**.
g. Where a practice is failing to engage their commissioner, and unilaterally seeking to determine its own restrictions, without consideration to specific risks and without due regard to the impact on patient access generally, then contractual action may need to be considered.
h. Commissioners should notify any **approved suspensions** to england.primarycareops@nhs.uk confirming relevant practice details.

This guidance is V1.0 and is correct at the time of publishing **05 March 2020** but may be subject to change, including cancellation. Commissioners should contact england.primarycareops@nhs.net if unclear on the current status of this guidance. GP practices should contact their local commissioner in the first instance.