

RCGP Briefing: Health and Social Care Committee session on addressing the urgent issues facing the NHS

Tuesday 31 January

Overview: the present crisis

General practice is the cornerstone of the NHS, carrying out 370 million consultations last year. We have been through a significant period of evolution over the past few years which has been accelerated by the pandemic, including expanding multidisciplinary teams, at and practices using new technology to scale collaboration, find innovative ways to manage and deliver care.

Yet general practice is under immense strain. We are facing a situation with a falling number of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) GPs looking after an increasing number of patients with ever more complex needs. As of August 2022, workforce statistics for general practice show:

- There were 27,515 fully qualified FTE GPs, a loss of 242 GPs since the start of the year. This figure also represents a 2.1% since June 2019 and a considerable 6.3% decrease since records began in 2015.
- The number of patients signed up to a GP practice has increased by 9% since 2015. In August 2022, each GP was looking after 2,248 patients on average, compared to 1,938 in 2015 - a 16% increase.

A recent RCGP survey paints a worrying picture of a service in crisis. 1,262 GPs responded to our survey between 3 March and 4 April 2022. The survey showed that:

- 42% of GPs say that they are planning to quit the profession in the next five years
- 65% of GPs say that patient safety is being compromised due to appointments being too short
- 68% of GPs say they don't have enough time to adequately assess and treat patients during appointments

In 2022, the RCGP launched [Fit for the Future: a new plan for GPs & their patients](#) to put pressure on politicians and decision makers with responsibility for the NHS in England to commit to a bold new plan to provide GPs and patients with the support that they need.

GP workforce

Years of under-investment in general practice and the chronic shortage of GPs and other members of the practice team means that without urgent action from politicians and NHS decision makers, the ability of general practice to meet patients' needs is in jeopardy.

Despite an agreement from Government that we need 6,000 extra GPs the number of FTE fully qualified GPs has fallen by 5% between September 2015 and 2021 whilst the

population is 4% larger and health problems are getting more complex. Targets to deliver more GPs continue to be drastically missed, and we simply do not have enough GPs to meet the needs of a growing and ageing population, with increasingly complex needs, on top of managing the fallout from the pandemic.

To ensure GP workload is sustainable, we must have the right staffing levels. This in turn, will help reduce stress and burnout, as well as increase retention rates and job satisfaction. This is why the College is urgently calling on the Government to devise and implement a new recruitment and retention strategy that goes beyond the promise of 6,000 more GPs pledged in its 2019 election manifesto, as well as funding for general practice to return to 11% of the total NHS spend, more investment in our IT systems and premises, and steps to cut bureaucracy so that GPs can spend more time delivering care to our patients.

Retention

The most impactful way to meet this growing demand is to expand the general practice workforce. To address this workforce crisis, action needs to be taken on two fronts:

1. There needs to be a sustained increased inflow of doctors to the profession, with GP training capacity expanded.
2. More GPs need to be supported to remain working in general practice for longer.

Our 2022 survey of RCGP members found that **39% of the GP workforce across the UK are seriously considering leaving the profession within the next five years.** This could translate to over 22,000 GPs leaving the workforce across all four nations. Pressures will continue to intensify for those still in practice, creating a vicious cycle whereby increasing numbers of GPs continue to leave the workforce due to insurmountable pressures.

Urgent action is needed to break this cycle, supporting today's GPs to stay in practice, while we continue to train tomorrow's GPs.

Access in general practice

Most patients are pleased with their practice once they get to see someone but the complaint we hear most, is that too many patients find booking an appointment too difficult. GPs and their teams are working flat out to deliver the care and services our patients need. We delivered a record 36.1 million consultations in October 2022, almost 40% of these on the day they were booked, more than 80% within two weeks and more than 71% in person.

GPs want their patients to receive timely and appropriate care and share patient's frustrations when this isn't happening. But difficulties accessing general practice isn't the fault of GP teams, it's a consequence of an under-resourced, underfunded, and understaffed service working under unsustainable pressures.

Many GPs are running on empty and burning out. This isn't safe for them or for their patients and it's leading many to face the difficult decision to leave the profession earlier

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than they planned – and when more GPs are leaving the profession than entering it, it does not bode well for the future.

Highlighting problems patients are having accessing general practice services shouldn't be done by criticising and demoralising hard working GP teams, who are doing their absolute best in extremely difficult circumstances to meet the healthcare needs of their patients.

Access to GP services is important, but it is only a starting point to ensuring our patients receive the safe, personalised, and appropriate care they need. Ultimately, we need more GPs, more members of the practice team, and serious efforts to reduce spiralling GP workload, so that we can deliver safe, appropriate and timely care for patients.

What do we want

The RCGP are calling on politicians and decision makers with responsibility for the NHS in England to urgently commit to a bold new plan to provide GPs and patients with the support that they need.

As outlined in our campaign - [Fit for the future: a new plan for GPs and their patients](#) - we are calling for:

- **A new recruitment and retention strategy** that allows us to go beyond the target of 6000 more GPs, backed by a £150 million annual GP retention fund, increasing the number of GP training places by at least 10% year on year, and changes to the current visa rules to make it easier for international GP trainees to stay and work in the UK.
- **An NHS wide campaign to free up GPs to spend more time with patients by cutting unnecessary workload and bureaucracy**, including through a review of contractual requirements and improving coordination between primary and secondary care.
- Improving patients' experience of accessing care by investing in a new suite of IT products and support for practices, **making it easier for patients to choose to see the same GP or the next available member of the team.**
- **Allocate a bigger share of the NHS budget to general practice** to return funding to 11% of total health spend - with £1 billion additional investment in GP premises, more funding for practices serving deprived communities, and extra money for primary care networks to provide preventative care and promote population health.

GPs are working hard to make this vision for our patients a reality, we now need the government to provide GPs and their teams the support they need. Further information can be found on [our website](#).

Key Statistics

General

- General practice is the cornerstone of the NHS, helping around 50 million people in England every year, carrying out 370 million consultations last year (2021) - that's up 18.5% from 2019.
- 80% of GPs expect working in general practice to get worse over the next few years, compared to only 6% who expect it to get better. (RCGP Tracking Survey 2021-22)

GP Workforce

- Despite an agreement from Government that we need 6,000 extra GPs the number of FTE fully qualified GPs has fallen by 5% between September 2015 and 2021 whilst the population is 4% larger and health problems are getting more complex.
- There were 45 fully qualified FTE GPs per 100,000 patients in April 2022 compared to 52 in September 2015, when records began. This means that on average, GPs are currently looking after 2,056 patients, which is more than 10% more patients than in 2015.
- 42% of GPs say that they are planning to quit the profession in the next five years.

GP Workload

- On average, as of July 2022, GPs look after 2,247 patients - 16% more patients than in 2015.
- Between 2019-21, the number of clinical administration tasks delivered by GPs in England rose by 28%, up to 107 million in 2021.
- 68% of GPs say they don't have enough time to adequately assess and treat patients during appointments. (RCGP Tracking Survey 2021-22)
- 64% of GPs say they don't have enough time during appointments to build the patient relationships they need to deliver quality care. (RCGP Tracking Survey 2021-22)
- 65% of GPs say that patient safety is being compromised due to appointments being too short. (RCGP Tracking Survey 2021-22)
- 75% of GPs said that encouraging specialists to refer patients to other specialists themselves where appropriate rather asking GPs to re-refer them would make a significant difference to GP workloads.
- It is impossible for most GPs to manage the workload required in the time allocated, meaning on average they work 10 hours more a week than their contracted hours.

Multi-Disciplinary Teams in

- Over half of GPs (57%) surveyed in our annual tracking survey said that their practice does not have access to the support and guidance to effectively integrate the new staff roles.
- 74% of respondents to our survey said that their practice does not have sufficient physical space necessary to accommodate new staff.