

NHS e-Referral Service - Paper switch off project

Communication plan template

We have developed this guidance to help you create an effective communication plan that will allow you to communicate meaningful messages that compel your audience to act. You can use this template to create your communications plan. The text in grey is advice and guidance and should be deleted from your final document.

1. Where are we now?

The purpose of this section is to indicate your current position. Consider the strengths and weaknesses and identify any opportunities and threats. This will help you identify and develop your communications objectives, such as communicating the benefits of e-RS and paper switch off to your target audience.

Recommended word count: 200 – 300 words.

Example content:

ABC NHS Foundation Trust is working towards a paper switch off target date of October 2018. We are working with NHS Digital and NHS England to achieve this. GP engagement and utilisation of e-RS is low (currently 20%). Key staff such as booking clerks and medical secretaries aren't aware of the target.

2. What does success look like?

In this section please identify what successful communication activity looks like. What are you hoping to achieve and why?

Recommended word count: 200 – 300 words.

Example content:

Internal communications

- Key staff are aware of the target and what they need to do to achieve it. This includes the executive team and staff directly involved in managing referrals.

External communications

- GPs will know more about the requirement to use e-RS to refer all patients to ABC NHS Foundation Trust for all first outpatient appointments by October 2018. After this date, paper referrals to first outpatient appointments will no longer be funded.
- GPs will be aware that the trust is working with the CCG, NHS England and NHS Digital to achieve this target.
- GPs and practice staff will be aware of the improvements which have been made to e-RS.
- The reputation of e-RS amongst GPs in the area will improve and GPs will use it.
- Utilisation of e-RS will begin to increase and will reach 100% by October 2018.

3. Communication objectives

In this section you should define your communication objectives. These should reflect how effective communications can help you to deliver your overall goal. If possible, prioritise up to three communications objectives.

Recommended word count: 200

Example content:

Internal communications

- Raise awareness within the trust of the paper switch off deadline and how the trust is planning to deliver this.
- Call to action - clearly define what staff (each target audience) need to do and by when (always be clear what the call to action is).

External communications

- Raise awareness of the paper switch off target of October 2018 for all trusts. After this date, paper referrals to first outpatient appointments will no longer be funded. Communicate PSO effective date to all GP practices and support queries.
- Raise awareness that the specific target date for ABC NHS Foundation Trust is June 2018. This is to enable NHS Digital and NHS England to support all trusts to achieve their target.
- Raise awareness of recent and planned improvements to the system (refer to the development [roadmap](#)) – improved Advice and Guidance, Referral Assessment Service etc.
- Raise awareness of the [benefits](#) of e-RS. These include:

- cost and time savings
- fewer missed appointments
- fewer inappropriate referrals
- shorter referral to treatment times
- choice of hospital or specialist
- choice of appointment date and time.
- Call to action – clearly define what GPs/practice staff need to do and the timescales (always be clear what the call to action is.)

4. Insight objectives

Your communications will be more effective if you have a clear understanding of your audience and their current views. Take the time to do some research with your target audiences. If you have this insight, you will be able to address their concerns and issues in your communication messages.

- Do you have a clear understanding of local GP views of e-RS and what the current barriers are?
- Can you identify the drivers that will make practices change their behaviour and increase utilisation?
- You could seek feedback from GPs/practice staff who may want to get involved or provide advice on how to make e-RS work better for them.

5. Who are our target audiences?

In this section you need to define your target audiences. You may find that you have lots of audiences that you would like to connect with, but it is important to know which audiences are the most important, so that you can focus your communications activity.

When considering your primary audiences, please think about why you are targeting this group and the nature of the message you would like to share with them. Sometimes these audiences are not always the most obvious. For example, if you would like to reach GPs, you may aim your activity at audiences that can influence GPs, such as practice managers.

Ideally you should prioritise up to three primary audiences for your internal communications activity and three for external communications. By concentrating on your primary audiences, you can focus your resources on the communications activity that will have the most impact.

Example content:

Internal communications

- Booking clerks
- Medical secretaries
- Consultants

External communications

- GPs and practice staff
- Referral management centre staff

6. Communication channels and key messages

Communication channels

The next step is to identify the best ways to share your key messages with your primary audiences. There may be many channels available to you, but you should select the best and most effective method to engage with your target audience. For example, you will need to work with the CCG to identify the communication channels they have with GPs and practices. See section 7 – Communication activity plan for a list of suggested channels. It may be that you identify gaps and need to establish new channels to reach specific groups, for example set up special staff briefings for booking clerks or issue targeted emails.

Identify all the communication channels that are available to reach the different target audiences. Consider:

- What internal communication channels does the trust have to reach the specific internal target audiences?
- What communication channels does the trust have with GPs/practices?
- What communication channels does the CCG have with GPs/practices?

Key messages

You will need to develop no more than a handful of key messages that you can apply consistently throughout your communications activity. These messages should be short, concise sentences that indicate what, where, when, why and how. You should tailor these messages to the different target audiences. Your messages should fit into one of three categories and should be relevant to the target audience you intend to reach.

Consider whether you want to:

- *tell your audience something*

- *sell your audience something*
- *understand your audience's attitudes and behaviour.*

Communications is all about creating a narrative and you will need to consider the tone of voice and the language of your key messages.

Example content:

These suggested key messages could be used for external communications (GPs/practices) and adapted slightly for internal audiences (booking clerks):

- ABC NHS Foundation Trust is required to meet the NHS e-RS paper switch-off target by XXX date 2018. After this date, GP paper referrals to first consultant outpatient appointments will be returned to the referrer (The contractual switch-off target date is October 2018.) (For internal audiences the language would change to 'This would change to Our Trust is required...').
- We are committed to improving the system and we are working collaboratively with local CCGs to address any current issues. This includes (provide details of what work is taking place to address problems):
 - ASIs (what is going to change?)
 - processes (what is going to change?)
 - training opportunities
- As well as the work that we are doing to improve the local system and processes, NHS Digital's e-RS programme team is also focusing on enhancing the national system. Details are available on this [roadmap](#). Highlights include:
 - enhanced Advice and Guidance functionality - requires providers to set up and operate advice and guidance services for non-urgent GP referrals, allowing GPs to access consultant advice prior to referring patients into secondary care
 - Referral Assessment Service - allows a hospital or clinic to receive a referral without an appointment booking to support 'refer now – book later'.
- The key [benefits](#) associated with e-RS include:
 - cost and time savings
 - fewer missed appointments
 - fewer inappropriate referrals
 - shorter referral to treatment times
 - choice of hospital or specialist
 - choice of appointment date and time.
- **Add a clear call to action** – include details of the timescales involved and what GPs/practice staff need to do next or what they should expect next, for example a follow-up email/comms. Always be clear what the call to action is.
- Gathering feedback – is there anything that you would like to know from GPs? Possibly provide a contact email address for GPs who may want to get involved.

7. What will we do, how and when?

The next step is to set out the communications activity that will help you to meet your communications objectives. You will need to establish who in your team/CCG is responsible for clearly communicating the key messages to your target audience.

Be sure to set realistic timescales and expectations.

Delivering the communications – key principles

- **Internal communications campaign** – plan and deliver an internal campaign within the trust. Consider developing a strong and consistent design to use on your communications materials so that it stands out from the crowd and has a chance of being seen on the notice board. Be creative, but work within your organisation’s brand guidelines and the [NHS Identity Guidelines](#).
- **External communications campaign** – plan and deliver a campaign targeted at your external audiences. Again, consider developing a strong and consistent design.
- **Planning** – develop a detailed communication activity plan (template below). Identify key publication dates and meeting dates and assign someone to be responsible for delivering the whole communication plan or nominate people who will lead on individual elements of the plan, for example a CCG rep re GP bulletins and a Trust rep regarding internal communications.
- **Timing** – start your communications as soon as possible and keep your audience informed about progress. Also ask for their feedback and views and provide a feedback mechanism. For example, **Yeovil District Hospital** contacted GPs two months before their switch off target date and updated them regularly.
- **Issue a phased series of communications** – Repeating the message is good as they may have missed the article in the first bulletin! This way your audience will stand a better chance of finding out what is happening and what they need to do.
 - Now – issue initial comms advising of the deadline that the trust is working to, stating that you are being supported by NHS Digital and NHS England to deliver this. Identify what work is being done now to address any current issues. (See key messages section for detail.)
 - Issue follow-up comms – to provide an update on progress. Be clear what the call to action is. What do GPs/practices/booking clerks need to do and by when?
 - Issue further follow-up comms as required – giving further updates on progress. Be clear what the call to action is. For example, from (insert date), you should only use e-RS and paper referrals will no longer be accepted by the trust.
- **Celebrate your success** – continue to communicate after you have achieved your PSO target. Use the **press release** template to let your local community know what has been achieved and to promote the benefits of patients booking their own appointments online. Celebrate success internally within the trust.
- **Don’t stop communicating** – continue to communicate with GP practices so that you can identify and solve any outstanding issues and continue to build relationships.

Communication Activity Plan

Communication Channels/Activity How are you going to tell them? Examples below	Activity What are you going to do?	Deadline When does this need to happen by?	People Who is responsible for doing it?
Design of communication material	Consider developing a strong and consistent design to use on all your communications materials, so that it stands out from the crowd and stands a chance of being seen on the canteen notice board. Be creative, but work within your organisation's brand guidelines and NHS Identity Guidelines .		
Internal communications campaign – possible Trust controlled channels:			
Intranet			
Yammer (or equivalent)			
Blogs/video blogs			
Staff meetings			
Staff briefings/Team brief			
Email – all staff/targeted staff group			
Staff newsletter/bulletin/e-bulletin/magazine			
Establish bespoke channels – special e-bulletin, special targeted staff briefings			
Pay slips/ESR notice			
Footer message - add to all emails i.e. “we are going paperless – no longer accepting paper referrals from XXX. Are you ready?”			
Screensavers			
Posters around site			
External communications campaign – GPs/practice staff			

Communication Channels/Activity How are you going to tell them? Examples below	Activity What are you going to do?	Deadline When does this need to happen by?	People Who is responsible for doing it?
Trust controlled channels:			
Website			
Footer message on emails			
Social media			
Reply email – in response to receiving paper referral advising of future arrangements			
Special PSO bulletin			
CCG controlled channels:			
GP practice bulletin			
Email targeted to all GPs			
Email targeted to all Practice Managers			
Practice manager's meetings			
Via Local Medical Committee meetings/comms channels			
Other events/meetings			
Social media			

8. Evaluation

Evaluation is an important part of any communications campaign and should contain a range of measures. It helps you identify what has changed as a direct result of your communications activity. Think about key metrics such as the number of hits on your website, participation rates at meetings or the number of email subscriptions that may relate to your communications objectives.

- We will test the content of the communication material (email, article etc.) with a small sample of GPs to check that the tone is right and to help to ensure that it will be effective.
- Establishing a baseline position – ideally, we will engage with a different small sample of GPs to check what their current concerns and difficulties are with e-RS – to ensure that the contents of the communications material addresses these issues and to establish what they know about the national e-RS target.
- Evaluation – after each communication is issued, we will contact a small sample of GPs to check that they received the communication and to gather their feedback – is their attitude to e-RS changing? Do they intend using it in the future?