Consultation on Government's mandate to NHS England to 2020

1. The RCGP welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NHS England's consultation on 'the Government's mandate to NHS England to 2020'.

2. The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) is the largest membership organisation in the United Kingdom solely for GPs. Founded in 1952, it has over 50,000 members who are committed to improving patient care, developing their own skills and promoting general practice as a discipline. We are an independent professional body with expertise in patient-centred generalist clinical care.

Summary

3. The RCGP has severe concerns about the following assertion within the consultation document “this means by 2020, we will ensure every patient has routine access to a GP in the evenings and at weekends, as well as effective 24/7 access to urgent care.” The RCGP views the Government's proposals to provide all patients with seven day access to routine GP care by 2020 as a risk to patient safety, which has the potential to destabilise existing services.

4. The current number of GPs and practice staff is not sufficient to cope with the roll out of seven day GP services. GPs are already over-stretched simply providing five day routine access for patients, with many working unsustainably long hours just to keep existing services up and running. In order to provide these 'extended services' an increase in both funding and workforce far above the current amount would be needed.

5. In addition, the majority of GP surgeries in England (60%) already provide some form of extended opening, with 17% open over the weekend and 53% providing extended opening hours (outside the core hours of 8am-6pm). According to the GP Patient Survey, 74.9% of respondents said that they were happy with their GP opening hours. Therefore we question the evidence for the need to move to longer opening hours for GP surgeries.
6. In addition, the RCGP has concerns around the inclusion of the aspiration for each patient to have a named GP within the priorities for the NHS England Mandate. As the RCGP has previously stated, while we support this concept in principle we have concerns about the deliverability of the programme, given the workforce and funding crisis currently facing general practice.

7. The RCGP has been highlighting the need for a significant investment boost in general practice and primary care and we welcome this being flagged as a priority. Our recent Blueprint for building the new deal for general practice in England sets out ideas for how this transformation can be achieved, and we are working closely with the Government through the 10 point plan to tackle the current workforce crisis in general practice in particular. The College is urging the Government to prioritise putting in place a package of investment in general practice, with nine in ten GPs in a recent poll reporting that they feel they do not have sufficient resources to provide safe patient care within existing services.

**Detailed response**

*Please note that we have responded only to the questions that are relevant to the work of the RCGP.*

**Question one.** Do you agree with our aims for the mandate to NHS England?

8. The RCGP agrees in principle with the aims for the mandate

**Question three.** What views do you have on our overarching objective of improving outcomes and reducing health inequalities, including by using new measures of comparative quality for local CCG populations to complement the national outcomes measures in the NHS Outcomes Framework?

9. The RCGP agrees with this objective in principle, and welcomes the focus on health inequalities within the objectives. However we have reservations about how this objective could be met within the framework identified. The causes of health inequalities are complex and often result from issues which are outside of the ability of the health service to address, for example poor housing or levels of employment. As such the RCGP has concerns that this objective would be impossible to meet the health service alone.

**Question four.** What views do you have on our priorities for the health and care system?

10. A discussed above the RCGP has concerns around the fact that seven day opening for GP services has been made a priority for the health system. The RCGP views the aspirations of a seven day general practice service to be both unworkable and a risk to current services. With not enough GPs and resources to meet current demand, any further increase in working hours would require an increase in funding and GP numbers far and above what has been promised or could be reasonably achieved.

11. In addition, the majority of GPs currently operate either extended or out of hours services, with 60% already providing some form of extended opening, and 59% of all GP out of hours services being either GP run or led. While, according to the GP Patient Survey, 74.9% of respondents said that they were happy with their GP opening hours and just over half of patients say they know how to contact an out-of-hours GP service. This suggests that GPs are already providing some form of extended opening, and that patients are either happy with their GP provision or
are not aware of what is currently on offer. The RCGP therefore does not think there is sufficient
evidence to support this move.¹

12. It is the view of the RCGP that the Government should prioritise shoring up existing 5 day
services and investing in out of hours services. The results of a recent RCGP poll show that
both patients and GPs agree with this, with two thirds (66%) of patients say that ministers
should focus on improving existing services, rather than delivering seven day access to general
practice, and nearly all GPs (98%) disagreeing that general practice has sufficient resources to
deliver safe patient care seven days a week.

13. The RCGP also has concerns around the priority that “People will have a right to a specific
named GP who will be responsible for coordinating their care and making sure they get the right
support in the right place at the right time.” The current workforce and funding pressures have
left many GPs struggling to keep up with the most basic patient demand. As such while it may
be an admirable aspiration many GP surgeries will find it impossible to ensure that a patient is
able to see a particular GP within a particular timeframe, and as such this priority risks
unnecessary raising patient expectations.

14. The RCGP welcomes the assertion within the consultation document that we will see a
continuation of the Better Care Fund until 2018. However the RCGP has long standing
concerns around the long term viability of the Better Care Fund, and would like clarification on
what other revenue streams would be provided if it were to be stopped, in order to support
services which as dependent on this funding for their continuation.

¹ RCGP. Seven day access to routine general practice – position paper. http://www.rcgp.org.uk/policy/rcgp-policy-areas/~/media/Files/Policy/A-Z-policy/RCGP-Position-statement-7-day-access.ashx