

Changes to the GP-led out-of-hours service in west Kent

Introduction

This briefing paper provides an update on changes and reaffirms the need for current GP-led out-of-hours bases at Tonbridge Cottage Hospital and Sevenoaks Community hospital to be relocated to Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells hospitals. It builds on a previous briefing in September 2017 and outlines proposed next steps.

Background

In September 2015 NHS West Kent Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) combined three primary care services into one core service, made up of out-of-hours GP services; a Home Treatment Service, to support a reduction in emergency admissions; and a GP in A&E service, which is now provided by Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust, to treat patients who required primary care instead of emergency care. The GP-led out-of-hours service and the Home Treatment service are provided by Integrated Care 24 (IC24). As part of the new core Primary Care Service (PCS), NHS West Kent CCG proposed the out-of-hours GP bases be relocated within the two Emergency Departments (ED) at Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells hospitals, which gives a number of benefits for patients (outlined in more detail below). At the Maidstone site this was achieved, with the GP in A&E and GP out-of-hours service co-located within Maidstone ED. However, due to estates and capacity issues at Tunbridge Wells Hospital, full co-location was not achieved and out-of-hours bases remained at Tonbridge Cottage Hospital, Sevenoaks and Cranbrook. The relocation of GP out-of-hours bases in west Kent is in line with NHS England's Urgent and Emergency Care Review and is part of plans to integrate and improve urgent care services and develop urgent treatment centres at Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells hospitals.

We have conducted engagement with the public, clinicians, and Kent Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee to discuss the developments in local care and urgent care provision for west Kent patients, which first started in autumn 2014. More recently, the relocation of out-of-hours GP services was discussed at a series of public listening events held in each of the localities over summer 2017. People have consistently understood and generally supported these changes, and the rationale for having out-of-hours GPs based at the emergency departments. Since our initial engagement in 2014, we are now proposing the development of urgent treatment centres as well as increasing access to local GP services until 8pm Monday to Friday and also offering some weekend appointments, with effect from October 2018. Last summer's engagement showed widespread support for this enhancement of access to local GP services, and a more integrated service available to people in need of urgent care.

At the summer listening events initial timelines for changes to the out-of-hours services were suggested, which were then discussed at the HOSC meeting on 20 September 2017. It was proposed that the out-of-hours bases at Cranbrook would re-locate to Maidstone in December 2017, with Tonbridge Cottage hospital following in spring 2018. We agreed with the out-of-hours provider that at this point we would pause to review activity at the out-of-hours base at Sevenoaks Community Hospital. NHS West Kent CCG proposed to relocate the Sevenoaks base by March 2019.

The out-of-hours GP service is currently provided from Sevenoaks Community Hospital at weekends and on bank holidays between 9am and 2pm, and from Tonbridge Cottage Hospital from 6.30pm to 8am every weekday, except Tuesday, and 24 hours across the weekend.

In 2017, 18,048 out-of-hours GP-led appointments were offered in west Kent. Of those appointments, the out-of-hours service at Tonbridge Cottage Hospital saw just over 8,000 people and the service at Sevenoaks Community Hospital saw 707 people.

Case for change

The decision to relocate the GP-led out-of-hours service to Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells hospitals is in line with plans to establish new urgent treatment centres at these locations, which will see, diagnose and care for people attending with a wide range of conditions that can be treated by a GP.

The new urgent treatment centres will be fully opened by April 2019 and will provide a consistent 24-hour service, ensure greater integration of services with local emergency departments and use the staff available in the most effective way. Located in the main hospitals, alongside the emergency departments, the urgent treatment centres will also help to direct patients to the right care first time.

In the meantime, patients and staff will benefit from improved premises and facilities as well as better access to a broad range of diagnostic tests, consultant expertise and clinician and therapy support. There will continue to be two roving GP cars within the Tonbridge and Sevenoaks areas in addition to two cars in the Maidstone area to support patients who need to be visited in their own homes.

It will also allow a 24-hour a day, seven-days a week GP-led service to be based at the emergency department, to see patients who attend A&E when their care needs can be met by a GP or nurse, allowing the emergency teams to focus on those who need the specialist care that they provide.

Progress

As a first step, the base in Cranbrook, which offered appointments at weekends and on bank holidays, was relocated to Maidstone hospital in December 2017.

Relocating the bases at Sevenoaks Community Hospital and Tonbridge Cottage Hospital has become a priority as Integrated Care 24, the current provider of the GP-led out-of-hours service, is facing staffing challenges in west Kent. In part this may be due to the isolation and lack of support for a lone working GP. Consolidating staffing at two main sites, will secure the delivery of a consistent and robust rota for the service.

Next steps

To deliver a consistent out-of-hours GP service, we are proposing that, from 1 June 2018, patients who need a face-to-face GP appointment out of hours will be seen in a dedicated and co-located facility at Maidstone Hospital or Tunbridge Wells Hospital.

As a result of these changes, from 1 June 2018, **out-of-hours GP-led face-to-face appointments** will no longer be offered at Sevenoaks Community Hospital or Tonbridge Cottage Hospital.

Following the service's relocation to Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells hospitals, primary care clinicians will be working within the emergency departments 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

If agreed, we will communicate these changes to patients and the wider public, with a particular focus on parents with young children, as approximately one third of those who used the service at Tonbridge Cottage Hospital and the majority of those who visited an out-of-hours GP at Sevenoaks Community Hospital in 2017, were under the age of four.

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