

Covid-19 update for Kent Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee – January 2021

Content of this report is accurate for the deadline of paper submissions. Verbal updates will be provided at the committee meeting.

Current pressure from Covid-19

The NHS across Kent and Medway has been dealing with significant pressures from the pandemic for many weeks as a result of community infection rates being amongst the highest in the country since mid-November. High infection rates are now an issue across the country; and whilst Kent is no longer the highest we remain under very significant pressure.

NHS staff across all services continue to do everything they can to support patients and respond to the pandemic; whilst also supporting those with non-Covid related health problems. The extreme pressure over a prolonged period is taking its toll and many staff are exhausted.

On behalf of all NHS service leaders we would invite the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee to acknowledge the monumental efforts that NHS staff have been making since the pressures of Covid-19 began almost 12 months ago. It has been a year like no other in the history of the NHS.

We are currently still facing the highest level of pressure on NHS services from Covid-19, and expect this to continue for a number of weeks. But the vaccine offers us all hope that in the months ahead we can get on top of the virus, reduce the number of people becoming seriously unwell and dying, and begin to return to normality.

Deaths linked to Covid-19

The impact of the pandemic on Kent residents has been significant. As of 17 January, in Kent there have been:

- 2,861 deaths within 28 days of a positive test
- 2,342 deaths with Covid-19 recorded on the death certificate

Many thousands more have been hospitalised with serious symptoms.

Hospital services have been under extreme pressure from late November through into January. The second wave of the pandemic has seen more than twice the number of Covid-19 patients in hospitals across Kent and Medway compared to the first wave. At the peak of the first wave there were approximately 600 confirmed covid positive patients in hospital beds. In this second wave we have seen over 1,200.

GP surgeries continue to provide a mix of remote and where required face-to-face appointments operating in covid-secure ways to limit the risk of infection. There have been some instances of practices needing to temporarily suspend face-to-face appointments in response to staff sickness or deep-cleans. Unfortunately there continue to be a minority of abusive reactions from patients related to frustrations with the limited access at this time. GP services are now a fundamental part of the vaccine programme (more information below).

Community services continue to support a wide range of patients from the housebound to those being discharged from hospital. Kent Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust will be playing a significant role in the Covid-19 vaccination programme as the lead co-ordinating organisation for the large scale vaccination sites.

Mental health services continue to see increased activity related to pandemic issues and the CCG is working with providers to extend access with a business case agreed for a 24/7 crisis phone line and media advertising to promote services available across Kent and Medway.

The Clinical Commissioning Group continues to provide the co-ordinating role as the system's command centre and liaison with NHS England/Improvement South East. A number of clinical staff from the CCG have been redeployed to support frontline services.

Staffing

Staff absences from Covid-19 infection and self-isolation following test and trace contact have had a significant impact on all services from hospitals to ambulance services and general practice. Absence rates are currently around 5% across all Kent and Medway providers. There has been an improvement in recent weeks; and with significant progress in vaccinating staff it is hoped that staffing rates will continue to improve.

Planned care

The NHS worked hard during the summer/autumn to restart and maintain other non-Covid services. Significant progress was made in restarting services and maintaining these as infection rates began to rise through November. This has meant overall bed occupancy in hospitals has been higher than in the first wave (where a major programme to discharge and pause non-urgent services took place in preparation for Covid-19 admissions).

However, due to growing pressure from Covid-19 infections, all hospital trusts in Kent and Medway have paused certain planned treatments. This began in early December and the majority of non-urgent surgery and diagnostics are currently paused, but being kept under constant review. Cancer and other services have worked hard to maintain urgent services through the second wave, and Kent has consistently being the highest performing area in the country for maintaining cancer treatments. A small number of urgent treatments have needed to be rescheduled due to individual operational pressures at the time appointments were due to happen.

We recognise the impact on individual patients of delaying non-Covid treatments. As soon as the immediate pressure from Covid-19 infections allows the NHS will aim to restart the non-Covid treatments that have paused.

Critical care transfers within and out of Kent and Medway

Critical care units across all Kent and Medway hospitals have been under extreme pressure over the last month. Services across all hospitals have worked together to manage the demand with more stable patients being transferred between units to try to ensure all units retain some capacity to accept new emergencies. We have also sought mutual aid from other hospitals outside of Kent and Medway; with Kent patients being transferred to a number of hospitals in other parts of the country.

We recognise the impact this will have for both patients and their relatives and we are working hard to repatriate Kent patients back to beds (either in hospitals or 'step-down' community services) in the county as soon as they are well enough.

A&E pressure and ambulance handovers

The pressure within hospitals, both in Accident and Emergency departments and inpatient services, have led to ambulance hand-overs taking longer than normal; with some waits of many hours at times during December and early January.

The hospitals and South East Coast Ambulance Service (SECAm) have worked together to ensure patients waiting in ambulances at hospital sites have been closely monitored and received the best possible care.

Ambulance crews waiting with patients at hospital has also increased the time some other patients have had to wait for an ambulance response to a 999 call. We have worked as an NHS system to try to maximise the number of patients with less serious conditions who can be treated on scene or taken to alternative services such as urgent treatment centres or minor injury units, rather than going to A&E. General Practice is also supporting ambulance crews with assessment of patients to avoid conveyance to A&E.

Military support

Military clinicians have joined the local NHS to work at the Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother hospital and Medway hospital. These are highly trained clinicians who are working to support NHS clinicians in services including Accident & Emergency, Intensive Care and other clinically critical wards. There are around 20 military clinicians and we expect them to continue working with us until February.

A number of non-clinical military staff are also joining us in January to support with non-clinical patient facing and general operational support.

General Practice prioritisation

General practice has continued to run with telephone triage and as many remote consultations as possible, either by phone or video conference. Face-to-face appointments have continued to be available where clinically required (with a few exceptions such as when staff sickness at a practice has required a temporary pause of all on site appointments).

Following a national announcement in early January, Kent and Medway Clinical Commissioning Group has confirmed a list of priorities for General Practice and identified a number of non-urgent services which can be paused.

GP teams in Kent and Medway have been asked to prioritise services which support the response to the coronavirus pandemic. These include:

- Support for patients with Covid-19
- Care home support
- Serious acute illness and deterioration in long term conditions
- Support for people with mental health needs, learning disabilities and autism
- Support for digitally excluded/extremely clinically vulnerable patients with appointments
- Essential drug monitoring
- Palliative and end-of-life care
- High risk or poorly controlled long term condition care
- Postnatal care
- Blood tests for medicine monitoring to support high-risk long-term conditions.

Immunisations, vaccinations and cervical screening (smear tests) will also continue.

The following services are being suspended temporarily:

- IUCD checks and change
- Pessary change
- New patient checks
- Medication reviews in stable patients
- Frailty and over 75 routine annual review
- Minor surgery
- Non-urgent investigations
- Vitamin B12 injections unless clinically indicated
- Non-core and locally commissioned services, unless clinically deemed essential.

The suspension is planned until the end of March 2021 but will be kept under review.

Pulse Oximetry in community

One of the ways general practice is supporting Covid-19 patients is through home monitoring of blood oxygen levels. The service provides a pulse oximeter device to measure blood oxygen levels and contacts patients at regular points during their self-isolation to review oxygen levels. We currently have around 5,000 pulse oximeters as part of the home monitoring services across Kent and Medway.

Covid-19 has shown a particular symptom called 'silent hypoxia' where a patient can feel relatively well despite blood oxygen levels dropping to dangerous levels. Monitoring the highest risk patients with pulse oximeters is helping to detect silent hypoxia earlier and get patients into hospital services to receive oxygen support before symptoms become severe.

Covid-19 vaccination programme

The vaccination programme began in December with the William Harvey Hospital being the first service to receive supplies of the vaccine on 7 December. Services then began rolling out across other hospitals and in General Practice as part of a nationally co-ordinated programme.

We recognise that the phased roll out of the vaccination programme has meant that some areas have not had access to the vaccine as quickly as others; and that this has been of considerable concern to patients and local elected members. The NHS in Kent and Medway is committed to ensuring all priority groups receive the vaccine as quickly as possible and we are working hard to make this happen.

We also acknowledge that distance to a vaccine site varies. When GP led vaccine sites began being planned the only available vaccine was Pfizer, which has complex storage and transportation requirements. Since then the AstraZeneca vaccine has been approved and initial supplies made available. The AstraZeneca vaccine is easier to store and transport; and on 7 January the Government announced that vaccination sites should be within a 10 mile distance for everyone. As a result we are reviewing options for providing vaccinations at more locations.

As of 18 January there were 39 General Practice vaccination services running and all hospital trusts had active services; with 1,000s of people being vaccinated. By the end of January there will be active services covering all 42 Primary Care Networks in Kent and Medway. Large vaccination centres will also be opening in Kent during January/February.

- Access to the large vaccination centres will be through a national booking services (for people who are sent a letter based on the national priority list).
- Access to General Practice services is through invitations organised by the Primary Care Network delivering the vaccine service.
- Hospital services have to date been largely focused on vaccination health and care staff.
- Care home vaccination for residents is being delivered through the Primary Care Network (PCN) services, whilst most care home staff are being vaccinated through hospital based services, including those run at community sites by Kent Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust (KCHFT).
- Housebound patients will be vaccinated by a combination of PCN and KCHFT services

At the time of writing this report, data on the number of vaccines delivered was only published at national and NHS regional level (Kent and Medway being part of the South East region). A more local breakdown may be available for the HOSC meeting. Provisional data for mid-January showed Kent and Medway was in line with the national average for the number of people vaccinated.

The vaccine is a critical part of beating the pandemic, protecting the most vulnerable and helping everyone return to more normal lives. The NHS in Kent and Medway is committed to ensuring there are local vaccination services across the county.

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