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Chaand Nagpaul
GPC Chair
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By email

7 September 2016

Dear Chaand,

PRIMARY CARE SUPPORT SERVICES

Thank you for your letter, dated 31st August, raising your continued concerns about the Primary Care Support England (PCSE) service, which is provided for NHS England through a contract with Capita.

I absolutely share those concerns. I would like to reiterate the apology I made personally when we met recently for the issues that have persisted across many aspects of PCSE services over recent months, and especially for the impacts this has had on practices at a time when they are already under significant pressure.

Capita has delivered an unacceptable level of performance in a number of the PCS service lines which does not reflect the standard of service that we commissioned Capita to provide. It is a top priority for me to ensure Capita address their performance and resolve all the current issues as fast as possible. To that end, we have been challenging Capita over recent months with increasing levels of scrutiny across every one of the service lines. Progress in some areas has been made but we know that these improvements are not yet being consistently experienced.

We have been rigorously holding Capita to account since the start of the contract. When Capita took over the service, NHS England established a dedicated Service Management Team and regular service management processes to monitor the operational performance and transformational changes to the service. These include monthly Boards, which I chair, to hold Capita to account for operational performance, against contractually agreed measures, and their transformation plans. I also hold regular meetings with Capita's Chief Operating Officer about performance. We have also continued the Stakeholder Forum we set up last year, to ensure that the views of stakeholders with respect to the operational service and transformational changes are heard.

Our management scrutiny and processes are underpinned by a number of robust

contractual mechanisms designed to ensure that PCS services are delivered in line with our expectations. These include applying financial service credits where agreed performance targets across service lines have been missed. We are already applying such regimes to Capita. There are also mechanisms to monitor and ensure compliance with information governance requirements, and a 6-monthly user satisfaction survey which is part of the performance indicators.

Since April, when issues started to emerge, we have scaled up the operational management scrutiny such that there are now daily performance meetings. This is working to drive improvement, albeit not as fast as we would all wish. In May, Capita developed an Operational Improvement plan for the issues then experienced in the Customer Support Centre, medical records, supplies and ophthalmic payments. As a result we have seen significant improvements in these areas though there remains more to do as we know the improvements are not universally seen by practices.

More recently, issues have emerged in other areas, including managing the applications to the National Performers List, especially for trainees, the timely completion of patient registration transactions and the responsiveness of PCSE to emails. These services are included in the daily performance meetings.

I am reassured that Capita has recognised the scale of the issues, are very committed to resolving them and has accordingly taken significant steps to bolster their operational capacity and capability within PCSE. I think it is important that Capita provide more detail to practices on the changes they have made and the steps they are taking over coming weeks. I know they plan to do this imminently.

I would like to respond to the points raised in your letter.

Payments and pensions

Given this area is a major priority for us all, I recognise and am very focused on addressing the recent problems, including incorrect payments, reimbursing GP training grants and trainee salaries on time plus issues with pensions. While this service has not been through any transformation process, the issues have arisen when the individual local arrangements for managing payments and pensions work has been migrated into the strategic PCSE sites. Capita has brought in additional skilled management and we are contributing more expertise to help tackle the issues and improve the quality and consistency of service. We have highlighted your areas of concern to be addressed in that process including simplifying the process for locums to submit pension payments and ensuring that receipts are provided. Where there are payment issues I can confirm our instruction to Capita is to notify affected practices at the earliest opportunity and remedy the error using urgent payment processes wherever possible to minimise the impact on practices.

Performers list

This also continues to be one of our greatest priorities, especially the process for adding newly qualified GPs. Given that PCSE are still operating with the inherited local process variations that exist across the country, this area has considerable complexity and risk, so we are scrutinising it very closely. As a consequence, additional expertise and management has been brought in to support the national Performers List processes, which, together with other urgent actions over the next two weeks, should provide better management information and process control.

Medical records

I know that the medical records service has been particularly frustrating for practices and patients. While some parts of the country are working reasonably well, some of Capita's courier hubs have struggled to get records consistently to all practices each week. There are also issues relating to medical records for new patient registrations and delays in retrieving medical records from archives which are contributing to the records that practices are waiting for. Capita is taking a number of actions to address these issues including adding additional routes and vehicles in the problem areas, issuing outstanding new patient registration records and stepping the resources for handling record retrieval requests. Based on Capita's action plan we expect the medical records service to be substantively sorted by the end of October.

You highlight a number of issues with the medical records pilot in West Yorkshire. We will be looking at those issues and fully evaluating the pilot ahead of the national roll-out.

Supplies

The supplies service has improved considerably over recent months. There are still isolated issues with products going out of stock but these are diminishing each month as the stock management arrangements are refined. We are continuing to monitor this area each week to ensure improvement is sustained.

There has been an issue about supplying Med3 forms. This form is supplied by the DWP via Xerox. The DWP were unwilling to supply us with the quantities required as GP practices on the vision system (90% of practices) could do this online. Alternatively the form can be ordered direct from Xerox. PCSE has posted details of how to do this on the portal.

Customer support centre

Although Capita has recovered its ability to answer customer calls on time, we share your view that the customer support centre is not yet delivering the service we would expect, both in respect of providing the right quality of responses to queries and responding to emails. Capita also accept there are issues and have launched an intensive programme of staff development to improve knowledge and skills, have changed the process to direct calls sooner to the specialist teams and are putting additional resources into teams responding to emails to reduce response times.

We expect the responsiveness to emails to improve significantly over the next 4-6 weeks.

If the Customer Support Centre was telling callers that PCSE departments are too busy to take calls, then this would be unacceptable. Each PCSE department now has staff assigned to taking calls and Capita are monitoring their capacity to ensure that this is sufficient.

Patient registration

There have been delays in getting new patient registrations accepted by PCSE. This centred on practices supported from the Preston office. Capita has put a plan in place to address this and I expect this to be resolved within the next three weeks.

Issue resolution

I also know that many practices and LMCs are frustrated that they are unable to get some issues addressed in a proactive and timely way. I have, therefore, also

commissioned an assurance review to look at the interfaces between PCSE national arrangements and local stakeholders to ensure that robust mechanisms exist for the feedback and resolution of local issues and promote more proactive communications.

I know that you and your members will be concerned about further changes to the services. We are taking stock of the remaining planned changes, with Capita, to ensure their plans fully reflect learning from recent experience. As a result, more time is being built into Capita's plans for testing and managing local transition. I will also ensure we have greater level of assurance and scrutiny before any change is implemented which affects users, and that there is greater stakeholder representation within the Project Boards which will oversee changes to each service line, to ensure that stakeholders have a strong voice to influence the design and implementation of future changes.

I can assure you of our continued absolute commitment to ensure services improve, and I am now more confident that Capita, with our help, are applying the right actions, capability and resource to drive recovery across all service lines. I do expect you to see significant improvement in all areas over the coming weeks as outlined above. I very much appreciate the support from you and your colleagues as we work to address the problems and recover service, and we remain committed to working closely with you and our stakeholders to validate that the necessary progress is being made.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen Wheeler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Karen Wheeler
National Director: Transformation and Corporate Operations