

LOOKING AHEAD TO LOCAL INVOLVEMENT NETWORKS

Minister calls on NHS and local government to help empower patients

New minister for patient empowerment, Ann Keen, has called on the NHS and local government to give more people a greater say over local health and social care services.

Launching two new resources to help both the NHS and local authorities prepare for replacement of the current system of patient forums with Local Involvement Networks (LINKs) next year, Health Minister Ann Keen, said:

“Services get better when they listen to the people that use them and respond to what they want. We know that the vast majority of people think that having a say in local health and social services is important, but we need more people to take an active role. For this to happen, getting involved must be simple and convenient.

“We will be engaging widely with local communities as part of the NHS Next Stage Review, and LINKs are an important part in making sure that local people continue to play a central role in the design of local services.”

Although existing patient forums have helped to improve health and social care services in some areas, the new independent LINKs will simplify and strengthen the current system because they will have the power to hold NHS and social care commissioners to account. They will also be able to refer issues to local authority overview and scrutiny committees who can investigate and take action, such as summoning NHS managers for questioning, if required.

The *Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill* currently going through Parliament includes proposals to streamline and modernise the current system by replacing just under 400 patient forums with 150 LINKs, which are expected to become operational from April 2008. To help local authorities prepare for this change, two ‘*Getting ready for LINKs*’ resources have been developed by the Department of Health.

LINKs have several advantages:

- They will be truly representative of their local population and will provide more ways of collecting and amplifying the views of the whole community;
- Instead of only monitoring health services, LINKs will be able to look at all the health and social care services in a specific geographical area - whether they are run (or funded) by local government or the NHS;
- Like patient forums, LINKs will be independently run and supported;

- With the power to refer services to scrutiny committees, LINks will bring real local accountability to the whole system, from the commissioning of services to front-line care; and
- LINks will provide a one-stop-shop for those who want to have their say, providing a platform for both individuals and community organisations.

Ann Keen continued:

“LINks have the potential to benefit everyone who uses health and social care services - whether by making it easy for people to share their views on services, or by giving them the opportunity to represent their communities. It will also be easier for councils and the NHS to engage with the often complex networks of patient activists, voluntary and community groups by helping local organisations to speak with one voice and have a real influence over key decisions.

“Local government must get planning underway now to avoid losing existing local expertise and to help the new LINks realise their full potential. I also urge the voluntary sector to get involved by sharing their experience.”

Notes to Editors

The first resource, *‘Planning your Local Involvement Network’*, is a document that incorporates the findings from nine LINks ‘early adopter’ sites. It sets out how local communities can prepare for LINks, such as the list of actions that local councils need to take, details of who needs to be involved in their establishment, and the resources required.

The second publication *‘Contracting a host organisation for your Local Involvement Network’* gives local authorities the information they need to procure a host organisation that will establish and support a LINk. It includes information about the services a host will be required to provide and a guide to the process for establishing a network.

The nine LINks Early Adopter Projects are supported by The Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health and the Healthcare. Commission. Further information about individual projects can be found by visiting http://147.29.80.160/portal/topics/?topic_id=44700004

The NHS Centre for Involvement has a unique role in the Early Adopter Projects as it has been leading on sharing the learning from these projects. The Centre has also been responsible for documenting examples of approaches and activities and has identified barriers to the successful growth and impact of the pilot LINks. Further information is at: <http://www.nhscentreforinvolvement.nhs.uk/what'snew>

Both 'Getting ready for LINKs' resources can be downloaded by visiting www.dh.gov.uk/patientpublicinvolvement

[ENDS]