Using an online practice network

The practice can establish an online network to facilitate discussion and innovation as part of its Patient Reference Group. This can establish online forums to promote conversation and discussion to support the practice to improve services. This is easy to set up and will give the opportunity to have more interactive group and will help to engage with a wider audience. This will also allow the practice to ask more specific questions that are not suitable to the survey and enable richer feedback from the group.

NHS Networks is a free resource dedicated to help people get together to share ideas and improve the health service for all those who work in and use it. It works like other social networks but within the NHS.

Registering on NHS Networks

Go to NHS Networks Enter details and follow instructions to register.

Setting up practice network

Once registered and logged-in, you can create a new network.

Give the network a name that indicates its purpose and links to the practice. The suggested name is [Practice name] Patient Reference Group. Choose a name you are happy to live with because you won’t be able to change it later.

Enter key words such as “patient reference group” and the practice name. This will help people find your network when they search.

It is unlikely that you will want to affiliate with other network so move to next step.

You will need a short description of the network eg: “A network for [practice name] to work with our patients to improve our services”.

You can also add a mission statement summing up the aims of your network, This can develop as the network does. Initially these can focus on the aims of the patient reference group. These could be:

1. To enable the practice to communicate with its patients.
2. To enable patients to express their views in an easy and interactive way.
3. To improve our services.

These can be amended at a later date if required

The type of network is likely to be ‘Patients and Public’ and the target audience is the registered practice population. It is suggested that the network is based on individuals applying to be members; this will ensure that applicants are within the target audience. It is likely that the network is not hosted elsewhere.
The practice will need a named individual to administer the network and the contact details should be entered. The look of the network with colours and logos can also be set.

Tools for a network

Once you have established the practice network there are a variety of tools to support communications. To manage these there is a toolbox within the administration section. This toolbox enables the administrator to control the look and the content of the network.

Discussion forums

The practice can facilitate discussion by setting up forums in which patients can start or participate in online conversations. This will allow patients to comment and input on problems and solutions for practice. Think how you want to prompt patients within the forum(s)

Content

There is a wide range of types of content that can be added depending on how the practice wants to support the network. There are options for:

- Forums
- Blogs
- Documents – eg local patient participation report
- News from the practice or general news on health issues
- Gallery
- Emailing members
- Events – eg PRG meetings

Invite to join

Once you have established the initial network, you can invite the members of the PRG to join. This can be done via the network. Simply select the Invite to Join function and use the contact tool to populate the email addresses. You may want to inform invitees that they will have to register with NHS Networks to participate.

Developing the network

The more the practice uses the network the more information and use it will get from it. Take an active interest, add links to relevant content on your website or elsewhere on the web, and ensure that forums are monitored and that points raised in them are addressed. Discussions won’t start up on their own, so you may want to get the conversation going.

Email alerts

People will not keep coming back to the network to see what has changed. NHS Networks allows you to generate an email alert to let people know when new content has been added, or when someone has made a new comment in a discussion forum.
To activate email alerts, members need to go to the My Settings page and select the desired options.