

Lancashire and South Cumbria Patient Participation Groups

January 2026

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Introduction

In order to gain an understanding of the patient participation group (PPG) landscape across Lancashire and South Cumbria, a survey was carried out electronically among the 195 practices in the region. Practice managers (or an alternative staff member) were asked to provide answers to a few questions relating to the existence of a PPG at their practice and to provide further information about the makeup of the group and how it operated, if applicable.

The purpose of the survey, which ran from July to November 2025, was to identify which practices need support and the type of support required, and also to understand how the ICB is able to support the development of, and ongoing engagement with, PPGs.

This report will provide an insight into the results of the digital audit and also support in the development of an action plan.

The requirement for GP practices to establish and maintain a PPG is a contractual obligation that has been in place since April 2016. This requirement is part of the NHS GP Contract and is considered in Care Quality Commission inspections.

PPGs are typically composed of volunteer patients, practice managers, and healthcare professionals from a medical practice. Their primary aim is to facilitate communication between patients and the practice, ensuring that patient perspectives are considered in decision-making processes. PPGs can vary in structure and function, depending on local needs and the specific goals of the group.

Executive summary

Only 17 out of the 195 GP practices across Lancashire and South Cumbria failed to respond to the PPG audit survey that was distributed electronically. This has provided us with some excellent insight into current experiences of GP practices in terms of their patient participation groups and their attitudes with regards the ongoing development and utilisation of such groups.

Of those who responded, 24 stated they did not currently have a PPG. Of those with a group, there are varying degrees of engagement and/or activity. As it forms part of the NHS England GP contract, it is essential practices without a group are supported to establish one as soon as possible and that those with less active groups are supported to develop them going forward.

A number of practices stated they are restarting lapsed PPGs or exploring more collaborative PCN-wide models of engaging with patients. Many report difficulties in recruiting people to join their groups, particularly from the younger demographic, and a number have continued to find it difficult to resume PPG activity since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The majority of groups have memberships of 10 people or fewer. Thirty-one per cent have between one and five members, 39 per cent between six and 10. However seven per cent of practices report a membership of more than 25 people. More than half of groups meet quarterly, and 75 per cent meet face-to-face, which is a significant increase from the findings of a similar exercise carried out three years ago when attitudes to face-to-face meetings was still cautious due to the recent pandemic. Nine in 10 PPG meetings are attended by a practice manager, almost half by a GP and 39 per cent by admin staff.

PPGs continue to be an excellent tool for practices where they are effectively utilised. Achievements include supporting patient engagement through newsletters and surveys,

supporting health promotion events, offering support at vaccination clinics, charity fundraising and campaigning on behalf of practices to support service improvements.

Through this exercise, practices have been able to outline some support requirements, including in recruiting new members, establishing or reintroducing groups, support with guidance and leadership, resources and sharing best practice.

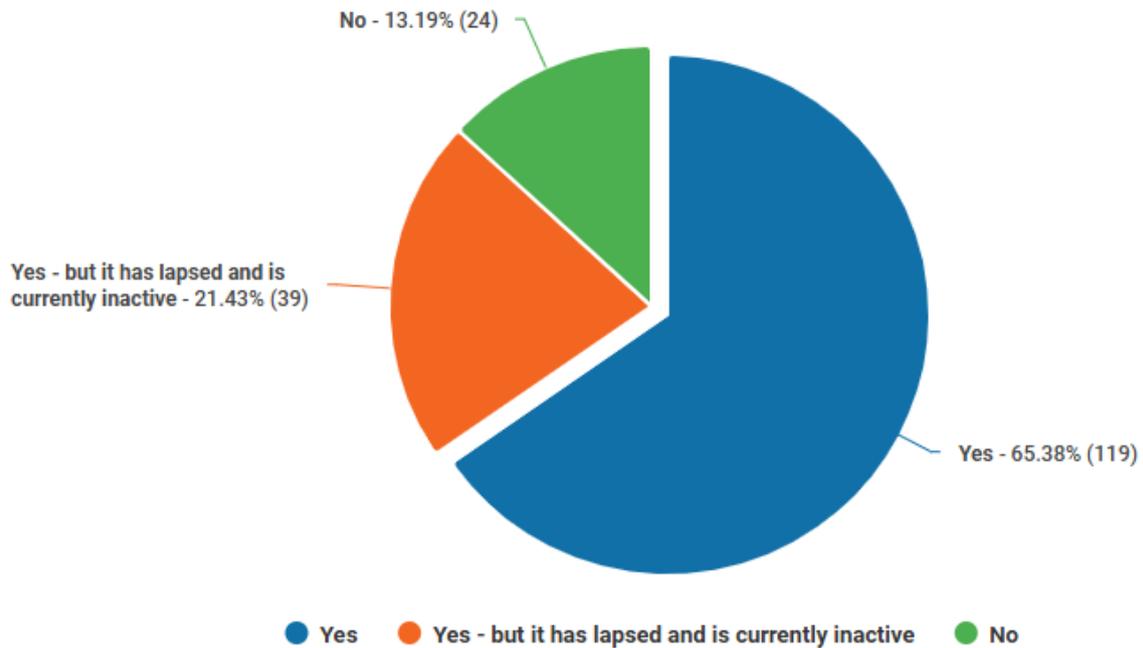
Recommended actions

1. Support the 24 practices stating they do not have a PPG to establish a group.
2. Look to establish networks of PPGs across localities to support sharing best practice.
3. Establish links between networks of PPGs in different localities to support sharing best practice.
4. Look into establishing annual conference events to bring together PPGs, practice staff and ICB staff in an effort to share best practice and provide valuable training and information.
5. Arrange peer support opportunities for interested groups to help them learn from successful groups in other parts of the Lancashire and South Cumbria area.
6. Develop a recruitment toolkit with templates, social media assets, and messaging guidance.
7. Provide standardised resources (terms of reference, confidentiality policies, agenda templates).
8. Develop database of PPG contacts within the ICB to support engagement beyond practice level, to improve relations and to explore training and support opportunities with groups directly.

Response rate

Only 17 practices across Lancashire and South Cumbria did not respond, from a total of 195 GP practices.

Do you currently have a PPG?



The number of practices reporting that they do not have a PPG has fallen from 36 in the 2022 report to 24. Several state they are in the process of restarting a group, while others report a difficulty in recruiting members. The possibility of establishing PCN-wide PPGs is also suggested.

Respondents were given space to comment on their PPG status. Below is a summary of the comments received regarding this question.

- Some practices have long-standing, active PPGs meeting regularly (quarterly or bi-monthly), often with chairs and structured agendas.
- Others have paused or disbanded groups due to low engagement, personality clashes, or workload pressures.
- Impact of COVID-19:
 - Many PPGs stalled during the pandemic and have struggled to restart.
 - Virtual groups were trialled but often had poor uptake.
- Recruitment challenges:
 - Common issue: difficulty attracting new members, especially younger patients.
 - Some practices report repeated attempts (posters, social media, newsletters, flu clinics, registration forms) with limited success.
 - Some groups now have only one or two active members or rely on PCN-led meetings.
- Many practices are actively trying to re-establish PPGs, with meetings planned for autumn/winter 2025.
- New practice managers often prioritise restarting PPGs.
- Some practices are exploring shared or PCN-level PPGs.

Approximately how many members does your PPG have?

Of the practices that said they did have a PPG, around 31 per cent stated they had just one to five members, while 39 per cent have between six and 10 members. A further 15 per cent said their membership was between 11 and 15. Seven per cent of practices have a membership of more than 25 people.

How often does your group meet?

More than half (52 per cent) of the practices with a PPG meet on a quarterly basis and 15 per cent bimonthly. Just under five per cent meet monthly and just over five per cent meet annually. A small number of practices reported meeting on an ad-hoc basis as and when required.

Does your group meet virtually or face to face?

Three quarters (75 per cent) of groups meet face-to-face, with just eight per cent meeting virtually. Significantly more groups have now resumed face-to-face meetings compared with in 2022 when this figure stood at 60 per cent, which is most likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic coming to an end.

Who attends meetings from the practice?

Almost 90 per cent of PPG meetings are attended by the practice manager and 47 per cent by a GP. Reception or administrative staff support at 39 per cent of PPG meetings, while 14 per cent are attended by a patient liaison officer or equivalent and 9.5 per cent by a nurse.

Please detail any activities or achievements of your PPG

A range of achievements were highlighted from PPGs across Lancashire and South Cumbria. These included:

- Patient engagement and communication
 - Production of newsletters, patient information leaflets, and contributions to community magazines.
 - Set up listening desks and feedback boxes in practices and local venues.
 - Reviewed and improved practice communications, including websites, phone systems, and waiting room displays.
 - Supported patient surveys, analysed results, and helped shape action plans.
- Health promotion and education
 - Organised health and wellbeing events, open days, and health fairs with external organisations.
 - Promoted screening uptake (cervical, bowel), vaccination campaigns (flu, COVID), and digital tools (NHS App, online triage).
 - Delivered awareness campaigns (e.g., alcohol awareness, dementia support, carers' information).
- Practical support for practices
 - Volunteered at flu and COVID-19 clinics, assisting with patient flow and health checks.
 - Helped test new systems (telephone, online access) and provided constructive feedback.
 - Supported practice initiatives such as triage rollouts and patient access improvements.
- Community and charity work

- Fundraising for local charities and practice equipment. One group raised £1,000 for a homeless charity.
- Established links with local VCFSE organisations, schools, and community groups.
- Created gardening and wellbeing projects for socially isolated patients.
- Advocacy and representation
 - Actively campaigned to prevent practice closures and influenced local healthcare decisions.
 - Engaged with ICB and PCN meetings, raising issues like service decommissioning and access gaps.
 - Worked with MPs and commissioners on policy and funding challenges.
- Service Improvements
 - Suggested and implemented changes to waiting room layout, staff visibility, and patient protocols.
 - Contributed to practice handbooks, welcome messages, and digital content.
 - Supported initiatives like defibrillator provision and training.

Please describe the level of communication between your PPG and the wider practice population (if any)

- Digital channels
 - Practice website: Many groups share meeting dates, minutes, and updates online.
 - Social media: Facebook and other platforms used for announcements and engagement.
 - Email: Common for updates to PPG members and occasionally wider patient groups.
- Printed materials
 - Newsletters: Quarterly newsletters are a popular method for sharing updates and health information.
 - Posters and noticeboards: Displayed in waiting rooms to promote PPG activities and invite new members.
- Face-to-face engagement
 - Listening tables: Set up in waiting rooms to gather feedback and share information.
 - Community events: PPG members attend health fairs, coffee mornings, and flu clinics to interact with patients.
 - Open days and drop-in sessions: Used to promote services and recruit members.
- Annual or ad-hoc patient surveys conducted by PPGs to gather views and inform improvements.
- Word of mouth and personal connections within local communities remain important, especially in rural areas.

What support do you feel you or your members currently require?

- Recruitment and engagement
 - Top priority: Help recruiting more members, especially younger and more active participants.

- Ideas for publicity and outreach, including social media campaigns, posters, and wider promotion across practices.
- Support to increase patient understanding of what a PPG is and why it matters.
- Structure and leadership
 - Guidance on roles and responsibilities (chair, secretary) and how to make PPGs more patient-led rather than practice-led.
 - Templates for terms of reference, confidentiality policies, and meeting agendas.
 - Help to prevent meetings becoming complaint forums and keep them constructive.
- Resources and practical support
 - Admin support for organising meetings, sending minutes, and managing communications.
 - Financial support for engagement activities, refreshments, and staff time.
 - Digital tools or platforms for virtual PPGs (eg closed Facebook groups, NHS app integration).
- Best practice and networking
 - Examples of successful PPG initiatives and ideas for projects/topics.
 - Opportunities for peer learning and networking with other PPGs locally or across the ICB.
 - Suggestions for standardisation and shared resources across practices.
- Training and guidance
 - Training for staff and PPG members on purpose, expectations, and constructive involvement.
 - Support with digital and IT skills for PPG members (e.g., using email, social media).
 - Clear information on system-level decisions, contractual obligations, and local service changes to help PPGs understand context.
- Strategic support
 - Help to refocus PPG purpose and encourage proactive contributions (surveys, events, communications).
 - Advice on creating virtual groups and using technology for engagement.
 - Input from ICB at meetings to strengthen links and provide updates.