

## Practices need to seize the opportunity of consolidating IT systems

***The trend for surgeries to become part of wider networks or federations of practices creates a great opportunity for them to use technology to work more effectively with their patients and peers, argues Paul Bensley, managing director of X-on.***

Increasing numbers of GP practices across the UK are looking to collaborate with other practices to share costs and resources, and to act as a vehicle to bid for enhanced services contracts. Market consolidation through GP networks and federations is seen as a [vital part of the future of general practice](#).

The [GP Forward View](#) hopes that moves to GP federations, hubs and super-practices will benefit more sizeable populations. Larger collaborations should give practices greater opportunity to shape, buy or build additional services, improving productivity, efficiency and patient services.

However [setting up such networks](#) presents a series of challenges. What is the best legal form? What services will be provided? What is the best size for such groups, and who is taking the lead? How do you involve patients?

Technology is another such challenge. Just as other parts of the NHS are looking to develop '[local digital roadmaps](#)' to set their technology plans, practices looking to collaborate need to decide on their own digital roadmaps.

Decisions on the choice of clinical system dominate such discussions. Will one such system work for all? What happens to contracts for systems that are not on the roadmap? What information sharing agreements are in place? How does GDPR apply?

### **Future proof telephony a key driver in improving practice efficiency**

Back office technology also needs to be considered. Without the business support infrastructure in place to help practices come together, there is likely to be much pain as staff struggle with different systems, different logins and different workflows.

However, the move to collaboration also presents a great opportunity to use technology more effectively. As the BMA sets out in its [essential components for a successful collaboration](#), practices can look to be future proof for the benefit of the general practice workforce.

Future proof telephone systems deliver one such opportunity.

For too long, practices have put up with phone systems that create more problems than they solve. Calls go unanswered, systems go down, and clinician and patients alike are frustrated having to wrestle with a phone service that is not fit for purpose.

Now, VOIP telephone technology is available to make call management much more straightforward. Networked practices can operate contact centres across multiple sites, with reduced call costs, little to no downtime, and support for extended hours' provision.

Integration between telephone and clinical systems mean that a patient's record can appear on screen as soon as the call is answered, reducing the time spent searching for information. Triage and other calls can be recorded and associated with patient records, to provide an efficient audit trail for any patient call. A mobile workforce can make and listen to calls, whenever and wherever the need arises.

And patients can now get through to the surgery – or, as importantly, not get through. Rearranging an appointment should not have to take up admin staff time. Automated telephone systems can support patient self-service now, during and outside office hours.

Extended hours' provision is also leading some practices to rethink how they can support communication preferences.

And in a future where voice data will help realise the benefits of big data and artificial intelligence, systems need to be able to store and analyse thousands of conversations to inform clinical decision making for the patient and the wider population.

### **Time to transform the telephony supporting primary care**

Having a single telephone system across the networked or federated practices is a straightforward decision. It has to happen. Making the right choice now will realise the benefits of technology for years to come.

However, in the past GPs have been left to their own devices for their telephone system. This means, for practices looking to come together, there can be multiple contracts in place, with multiple supplier relationships.

But dealing with this complex situation now should not hold back progress for the future. The [GP IT operating model](#) recognises that telephony can show demonstrable benefits through increased practice efficiency and improved patient care. Integrated and advanced telephony can – and must – enable transformed primary care across multiple practices.

Many CCGs have realised this, with bids for telephony improvements under the Estates and Technology Transformation Fund. Now other groups need to look to do the same, and seize the opportunity before them. Or they will end up on hold for many years to come.