

## The Establishment of Primary Care Networks (England, UK) Throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Exploration of Workforce Perceptions

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**Abstract :** In 2019, the Primary Care system in the UK National Health Service (NHS) was subject to reform and restructuring. Primary Care Networks (PCNs) were established, which aligned with a trend towards integrated care both within the NHS and internationally. The introduction of PCNs brought groups of GP practices in a locality together, to operate as a network, build on existing services and collaborate at a larger scale. PCNs were expected to bring a range of benefits to patients and address some of the workforce pressures in the NHS, through an expanded and collaborative workforce. The early establishment of PCNs was disrupted by the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. This study, set in the context of the pandemic, aimed to explore experiences of the PCN workforce, and their perceptions of the establishment of PCNs. Specific objectives focussed on examining factors perceived as enabling or hindering the success of a PCN, the impact on day-to-day work, the approach to implementing change, and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic upon PCN development. This study is part of a three-phase PhD project that utilized qualitative approaches and was underpinned by social constructionist philosophy. Phase 1: a systematic narrative review explored the provision of preventative healthcare services in UK primary settings and examined facilitators and barriers to delivery as experienced by the workforce. Phase 2: informed by the findings of phase 1, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen participants (PCN workforce). Phase 3: follow-up interviews were conducted with original participants to examine any changes to their experiences and perceptions of PCNs. Three main themes span across phases 2 and 3 and were generated through a Framework Analysis approach: 1) working together at scale, 2) network infrastructure, and 3) PCN leadership. Findings suggest that through efforts to work together at scale and collaborate as a network, participants have broadly accepted the concept of PCNs. However, the workforce has been hampered by system design and system complexity. Operating against such barriers has led to a negative psychological impact on some PCN leaders and others in the PCN workforce. While the pandemic undeniably increased pressure on healthcare systems around the world, it also acted as a disruptor, offering a glimpse into how collaboration in primary care can work well. Through the integration of findings from all phases, a new theoretical model has been developed, which conceptualises the findings from this Ph.D. study and demonstrates how the workforce has experienced change associated with the establishment of PCNs. The model includes a contextual component of the COVID-19 pandemic and has been informed by concepts from Complex Adaptive Systems theory. This model is the original contribution to knowledge of the PhD project, alongside recommendations for practice, policy and future research. This study is significant in the realm of health services research, and while the setting for this study is the UK NHS, the findings will be of interest to an international audience as the research provides insight into how the healthcare workforce may experience imposed policy and service changes.

**Keywords :** health services research, qualitative research, NHS workforce, primary care

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