

Population health is here to stay

The NHS describes population health as an approach that aims to improve physical and mental health outcomes, promote wellbeing and reduce health inequalities across an entire population.

At the Good Governance Institute, we have a broader view. Improving population health is about more than just reconfiguring the health sector and the integration of social care. We need a number of actors and sectors to work in harmony with a focus on people and their wellbeing, the wider determinants of health, and to address the causes of poor health.

The impact of COVID-19 has not delayed NHS England/Improvement plans for the rollout of a network of Integrated Care Systems (ICS) across England by April 2021, with ICPs and PCNs as support vehicles to the delivery. Doing this in a way that focuses healthcare outcomes on population health with citizens at the centre will require embracing thoughtful and flexible governance fundamentals in potentially new ways.

One of the big issues population health is trying to rectify is reducing health inequalities and avoiding the pitfalls and differences in health care provision – sometimes even between opposite sides of the same town – by focusing on the issues affecting a place's population.

The hope is that by using a new approach to healthcare, people will no longer be at the mercy of a postcode lottery and will have a better opportunity to prevent ill-health by focusing on preventative rather than reactionary measures.

Population health is about promoting the practice of a healthy lifestyle rather than only dealing with people once they're already ill. However, improving population health is easier said than done; it's about much more than just reconfiguring the health sector and integrating social care.



The COVID effect

COVID-19 has forced our health and care systems to face unprecedented challenges, which are only likely to grow as the pandemic continues. As we live longer and require more from an already struggling and under-staffed healthcare sector, there is an unprecedented need to do healthcare differently. In fact, a report from Nuffield Health reported that there were around 100,000 vacancies throughout the NHS – that's nearly 1 in 12 posts. The health and care landscape is complex to understand and difficult to navigate.

Linked but often confused with population health is population health management. While in some ways similar, the latter focuses on the methods used to bring the data together. In a GGI white paper, we explained population health management as the nexus that brings together an understanding of population need (public health) through big data, patient engagement and healthcare delivery to embrace the triple aim of experience of care, the health of populations and cost-savings.

Population health and governance

Good governance should enable the bold steps and significant change that population health entails.

Good governance does not concern structures and systems, but the effective interaction of leaderships, the ethical approach to making choices and change and building trust and legitimacy with populations served.

Good governance should have as its outcome an ethical culture, effective control, improved performance and legitimacy all of which are at the heart of the population health approach.

In cooperation with the National Commission on Governance in the Public Sector, GGI has sought to create an independent network that provides a space for those involved in population health to reflect and plan for this new approach.

The network has been set up to explore, discuss and build upon live issues surrounding the governance of population health, led by those who have a stake or responsibility in it.

The partners GGI has sought to involve in the network come from a wide range of sectors and types of organisation, both public and private, and include representatives from health, employment, housing, social care and sports, among others.

If you would like to find out more about our new network please do not hesitate to get in touch with Rory Corn at rory.corn@good-governance.org.uk.