



Department
of Health &
Social Care

Accountable Care Organisations

A brief guide

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What are Accountable Care Organisations?

In short: they are a new way of encouraging more joint working in the NHS.

Ever since its foundation 70 years ago, the National Health Service has not been a single, unified entity, but a collection of different institutions. Each has different systems, policies and practices, and there is huge variation across the country in how effectively these organisations work together on behalf of their patients.

The result is too many people experience delay and frustration due to poor collaboration between different bodies, which not only damages patients' experience of care but often leads to worse outcomes and higher costs to the NHS.

As we live longer and more of us develop complex, long term medical conditions, it is increasingly important that NHS services work together with each other and social care to ensure we get the support we need to stay well.

For many years, the health and care system has been grappling with the challenge of how to bring different organisations closer together. Through initiatives like the Government's [Better Care Fund](#) and NHS England's [Vanguards programme](#), there has been a major drive to build stronger partnerships between the different bodies involved in our health and care.

Accountable Care Organisations are one of the options in the next stage in this journey. If introduced, they will give different organisations across general practice, hospitals, mental health services, community and social care the opportunity to come together formally under a single, local body that will be collectively responsible and accountable for delivering health and care services for a particular area.

What will they mean for patients and staff?

By using a single budget and bringing local leaders together in a formal structure, the aim of Accountable Care Organisations is to create a much more coherent way of organising local services to meet the needs of their communities.

For patients, they should deliver a much more joined-up experience, particularly those with complex conditions requiring multiple appointments with different health and care professionals. For example, they should no longer face the frustration of having to repeat their story to different health professionals because of poor communication between teams.

If introduced, it is also hoped that Accountable Care Organisations will help the NHS to save money by enabling them to use their collective resources more effectively, in particular by preventing more people from "falling through the net" between services and therefore requiring expensive hospital care.

For staff, being part of an Accountable Care Organisation may mean working in a different way in future – as services become more integrated, it may mean some health professionals work in different (but local) locations and alongside different teams to deliver more integrated care.

But what will not change is the basic principle of a universal, taxpayer-funded NHS. Care will continue to be delivered free at point of need just as it is now.

How will they be implemented?

There are no Accountable Care Organisations in existence at present, but NHS England is currently developing a draft contract to help local leaders to establish them. It has already announced that there will be [a public consultation on the contractual basis for establishing an](#)

[Accountable Care Organisation](#), and will take into account patient and public feedback in developing a final model.

The Department of Health and Social Care recognised that there would need to be changes to certain professional regulations to enable them to function – such as changes to allow GPs to operate within an Accountable Care Organisation. It has just completed a public consultation on proposed changes to these regulations and will consider the findings of NHS England’s consultation before making any changes.

The two areas closest to creating an Accountable Care Organisation are Dudley and Manchester, as they have a long history of health and care organisations working together to support their communities. If NHS England decides to introduce the proposed contract, it would be rigorously tested on these two areas before being made available for other parts of the country.

However, it is very important to emphasise that Accountable Care Organisations are just one way in which the health and care system is able to join up services – not every part of the country will be expected to use this model if they feel other approaches may deliver the same results.

Will they lead to more private sector involvement in the NHS?

No. There is confusion with similarly-named ‘Accountable Care Organizations’ in the United States. But those are completely different types of body in a country that has a very different health system and regulation. The British proposals will not operate in the same way as their American equivalents. Our proposals will continue to be 100% taxpayer-funded.

Additionally, Accountable Care Organisations will only work effectively within health and care systems that already have a strong history of local organisations working closely together. In Dudley, for example, the proposed deal to create an Accountable Care Organisation involves a partnership between the NHS Trusts, GPs and the local council – all of whom have a long track record of working together.

Leading NHS experts like [David Hare, chief executive of the NHS Partners Network](#), and the [King’s Fund](#), an independent think tank, have indicated that they do not expect Accountable Care Organisations to lead to a significant increase in private sector involvement in the provision of NHS care in the future.