



London's Sexual Health Programme (LSHP)

London local authorities, in partnership with the NHS, are continuing to pioneer new approaches to improving the sexual health of the capital's residents. The London Sexual Health Programme (LSHP) is an example of this, as seen through its new online sexual health testing service and response to the needs of service users during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Background

The LSHP is a partnership of 31 London local authorities that coordinates strategy and planning of sexual health services in the capital. The programme team is hosted by the City of London Corporation on behalf of all related authorities.

The transfer of public health responsibility to local government in 2013 included sexual health commissioning. Since then, London boroughs have worked hard with local health partners and in collaboration with each other to improve service provision for Londoners.

Sexual health need in London

London faces some of the most significant levels of sexual ill-health and wider sexual and reproductive issues in the country. The impact of this inequality is greatest for:

- young people aged 15 to 24 years
- Black Caribbean and Black African communities
- Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men.

These groups are a much larger part of London's population than in the rest of England and the level of need for STI testing and rate of diagnosis for infections is therefore significantly higher. Access to testing, earlier diagnosis and anti-HIV treatment has helped to significantly reduce numbers of new HIV cases and the roll-out of routine commissioning of anti-HIV Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) since autumn 2020, after the national IMPACT trial ended, should contribute to further reductions in groups at the highest risk of HIV.

Authorities in the London Sexual Health Programme work together to address a range of challenges which include:

- More than 105,000 new STIs were diagnosed in London residents in 2020; a 30 per cent reduction on the 150,831 diagnoses made in 2019, consistent with the reduction across England.

- 17 of the 20 local authorities in England with the highest rates of new STI diagnoses were in London.
- New cases of syphilis rose from 1,437 in 2012 to 3,875 diagnoses in 2019 and 3,561 in 2020
- New cases of gonorrhoea have increased by a quarter every year since 2012 when there were 11,938 cases. In 2019 the number of cases peaked at 32,650 before falling back to 27,844 in 2020 when testing levels were lower.
- Gonorrhoea has a long history of becoming resistant to treatments and samples from all diagnosed cases are analysed as further changes can evolve rapidly. While the most resistant strains are not circulating within the UK at present, high rates of transmission and case levels of gonorrhoea infection are concerning.
- After a period of relative stability, new cases of chlamydia increased markedly in 2018. The number of cases peaked in 2019 at 35,729; before falling back to 25,066 cases in 2020, a similar number to 2017.
- The HPV vaccination programme has driven a decreasing trend for diagnosis of genital warts in heterosexuals which is also being seen for gay and bisexual men who have been able to access the vaccination from sexual health clinics since 2017.

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Sexual Health London (SHL.UK)

The London Sexual Health Programme is improving access to sexual health services by giving people the option to use services in clinics or the choice to access services online through SHL.UK.

SHL.UK is the capital's online sexual health testing, contraception and treatment service, which was launched in January 2018 and is commissioned by boroughs in London with the support of the London Sexual Health Programme. It is available in 30 boroughs and has been used over one million times since it was launched at the start of 2018. It's helping to improve access to sexual health services, with Londoners able to choose to visit a local clinic to get tested or access testing from home at a time that's convenient for them.

It is also opening up sexual health services to those who have not used them before. One in five online service users report it as the first sexual health service they have used, indicating the wider preventative role of SHL.UK in providing other ways for people to engage with sexual health services. This is helping to diagnose the undiagnosed and is supporting London towards the Fast-Track Cities target of zero new HIV infections.

Feedback from people using the service has been extremely positive, a sample of over 200,000 online service users found that 99 per cent would recommend the service to others.

SHL.UK has identified over 55,000 infections since it launched. 23,000 chlamydia treatments have been provided directly at pharmacies or through the post to service users without the need to attend a clinic.

In the year before the pandemic struck, SHL.UK accounted for approximately one third of all STI tests in London and the remaining two thirds were provided by NHS clinics. During the period of lockdown these ratios nearly reversed, with SHL.UK providing close to 60 per cent of all tests provided in the capital. The service is provided by Preventx working with the Chelsea and Westminster NHS Foundation Trust and LloydsOnlineDoctor.

How does SHL.UK work?

SHL.UK makes it simpler and more convenient for people to get tested regularly, encouraging early identification of STIs and avoiding onward transmission.

People can get a testing kit online at SHL.uk or via clinic websites. They are asked some questions to establish whether the service is right for them, or whether they should be

recommended to attend a clinic instead. Kits usually arrive within a couple of days or can be picked up directly from a clinic. The tests are easy to use and, once they are returned in the post for free, results are usually ready in a day or two.

If follow-up care is needed, such as for a positive or reactive result or for a safeguarding concern, there is a dedicated team of health advisors on-hand to support people to access care. SHL.UK is also integrated with most of London's sexual health clinics, giving clinicians access to the patient's online record, which results in prompt treatment and avoids unnecessary testing.

The service can also directly provide free treatment to those who test positive for uncomplicated forms of chlamydia. Treatment is sent through the post or for collection via a Lloyds Pharmacy and the service supports partner notification with contacts.

Since October 2020, the service also provides routine and emergency contraception online to residents in 11 boroughs. This enables clinics to prioritise the fitting of Long-Acting Reversible Contraception methods which have to be provided in person.

London boroughs have the option to commission this additional service to supplement existing routes for women to access contraception.

Maintaining sexual health services during the pandemic

Covid19 impacted significantly on the provision of sexual and reproductive health services across the capital, and when coupled with restrictions on social interactions for citizens, use of clinics was much lower in 2020 and into 2021. Reduced clinic capacity caused by infection control and prevention measures needed in clinics and NHS staff redeployment meant the online service needed to rapidly scale up delivery.

By September 2020, the number of online tests requested per month had risen to 50,390 from 22,495 in April, when the first wave of Covid had its greatest impact – more than doubling in six months. The online service was also expanded to cover residents of two more boroughs, Sutton and Hounslow, in response to the pandemic which saw levels of online orders increase further.

This was achieved by widening the eligibility criteria for an online test kit or receiving remote treatment and working in closer partnership with the NHS trusts operating clinics to ease the pressure on face-to-face services. This enabled clinics to prioritise the most urgent cases, eg young people under 18, people with serious symptoms of an infection and people needing further care after initially testing with the online service. Clinics developed digital core telephone triage systems to ensure that the residents who needed to be seen in clinic could be prioritised, with other residents signposted directly or referred on after clinical risk assessment to the online service

Capacity issues in clinics were compounded by reported increases in demand for contraception appointments in some areas as primary care services focussed on managing the impact of Covid-19 on London's communities.

SHL.UK has been able to assist with pressures on contraceptive services by offering online access to emergency and routine contraceptive. Since it became available in October 2020, SHL.UK has provided 10,910 Emergency Hormonal Contraception pills and routine contraception on 9,450 occasions.

Pre Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP)

The PrEP drug is a successful way of preventing infections for people at high risk of HIV and London boroughs want PrEP to be available to everyone who needs it. The NHS national trial began in 2016 with the intention of offering 26,000 places nationally. However, given the huge

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response and uptake of Prep, London Councils and other stakeholders successfully lobbied for PrEP to be routinely available to anyone wishing to access it through routine commissioning.

In addition to driving new clinical specifications and the SHL.UK service, the programme has also been working to embed routine commissioning of PrEP across London. The government confirmed local authority funding allocations in September 2020 and PrEP has been available to residents who need it at all major sexual health clinics across the capital since last autumn. Over half of the 26,000 PrEP trial places were taken up in London alone.

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Commentary

In the context of reductions in public health funding and increasing demand for sexual health services, London boroughs are proving that innovation and cooperation can help improve access to services. Sexual Health London makes it more convenient for people to manage their sexual health and has supported the continuing rise in new sexual health consultations in the capital.

However, there are continuing challenges. While new HIV diagnoses in the capital have fallen significantly since 2015, London will need to continue to make sustained efforts to reach the goal of zero new HIV infections by 2030. There have also been long term increases in some STIs such as gonorrhoea and syphilis.

On 29 October 2021, the government announced funding for sexual health services. London is set to receive £673.5 million for 2021-2022 via the public health grant, with a commitment for funding to be maintained in real terms until 2024/2025. While this provides financial certainty for boroughs, it is likely they will find it challenging to meet the demand for sexual health services, due to the predicted increase in London's population.

London's scale and diversity also means that it will need to continue to innovate to meet the needs of its population, many of whom have greater vulnerability to adverse sexual health outcomes.

SHL.UK, is transforming how residents can choose to access sexual health care by providing new options that are also able to appeal to residents who would not attend a clinic. Online registration, assessment and self-sampling are quick to do and can be done at a time and place that suits the individual.

The challenge of responding to Covid-19 and the disruption it has caused to the NHS make the work of the London Sexual Health Programme more important than ever and boroughs are working together to help manage the continuing pressures with services. London's sexual health system is more resilient because its local authorities have developed an online service that residents and front-line clinical staff have confidence in, and which has adapted to new needs and requirements through Covid. The online service will be able to continue to support residents and clinics by providing access to convenient online services, making it easier for people in London to manage their sexual health.

Author: Valerie Solomon, Policy and Projects Manager

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This member briefing has been circulated to:

Portfolio holders and those members who requested policy briefings in the following categories: Health and Adult Care