

Cancer Screening: during Covid 19 and programme recovery

Breast

Background

The breast screening programme in London detects around 2,000 breast cancers per year:

- It accounts for around 40% of the breast cancers diagnosed in the capital each year.
- Cancers detected through the programme are on average at an earlier stage at the time of detection than those that present at symptomatic services and have a better outcomes.
- The programme was paused between the end of March and June 2020. Since it was able to restart in June 2020 there has been a reduction in capacity due to infection control requirements.

Aims of the recovery programme:

- The NHS Planning Guidance expects that all backlogs of delayed invitations will be cleared by March 2022; all the 'missing' treatments for breast cancer will be recovered and that the round length (time between repeat screens) to 36 months will be restored. There is also an ambition to restore screening uptake to pre Covid levels of 65%
- An additional £50m has been made available nationally to support the recovery of the breast screening programme

Progress to date

- Recovery of the programme has been carried out in line with national guidance. This has meant that priority groups for screening were identified and that these groups were invited according to their levels of risk. Women with a higher risk of breast cancer continue to be invited by the programme.
- The backlog of women who had an appointment booked when we went in to the first lockdown was cleared by November 2020. We are now making progress on inviting women whose invitations have been delayed which will meet the intention of the backlog being cleared by March 2022.
- Additional resources were made available by NHS England and NHS Improvement (London) ahead of the national funding being available, which has enabled us to make faster progress.

Key interventions to recovery

Make the most effective use of available capacity

- Because of the reduced capacity for screening, there was a national decision to change the method of invitation from a timed appointment to an open invitation. This means that women are asked to telephone the service to book an appointment. This method of invitation aimed to make the best use of limited screening capacity while social distancing is in place.
- Changing the method of selecting women to be invited to ensure that women are not invited too early.

Increase screening Capacity

- Reduced the number of Radiography vacancies by 54% through a number of workforce initiatives – including national recruitment drive and supporting apprentices but more to do.
- Ensure adequate equipment and estate is available
- Work with services to reduce their appointment times whilst maintaining national infection control processes and standards.

Governance

- The recovery of the programme is being steered by an oversight group that includes representation from patients and from Integrated Care Systems.

Bowel Cancer Screening

Bowel Cancer Screening invitations paused between March 2020 and July 2020 due to COVID-19, across the whole of London.

Westminster and RBK&C is covered by the West London (WL) Bowel Cancer Screening Programme (BCSP) delivered by Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust.

WL BCSP has fully recovered the backlog that built up during the COVID-19 pause.

It will begin the age extension down to people aged 50 years, starting with the 56 year olds, from 24 May 2021. This will make this programme the second in London and the UK to start age extension.

In terms of performance, WL BCSP is meeting its standards on:

- Referrals for a Specialist Screening Practitioner (SSP) Appointments within 2 weeks of positive test
- Referrals for a Diagnostic Appointments within 2 weeks of SSP assessment
- Pathology turnaround times

Cervical Screening

Between 10th April 2020 and 6th June 2020, invitations for cervical screening were paused across England. Sample takers were asked to prioritise screening for women at higher risk i.e., those with a previous abnormal result and those on early recall. Colposcopy services prioritised their high grade and 2 week wait referrals at this time and deferred those referred with low grade cytology or non-urgent clinical reasons

All women who were due for routine screening received an invitation or a reminder letter by mid-October 2020

Primary Care sample taking venues, including those in Westminster and RBK&C, have prioritised cervical screening alongside the Covid-19 vaccination programme and have now cleared the deficit of samples taken between March 2020 and February 2021 when compared to the previous year.

Colposcopy services including those at Chelsea and Westminster and West Middlesex hospitals have worked to clear the backlogs of low grade and follow-up cases built up through the first lockdown and to ensure that all women requiring treatment for cervical abnormalities are seen.

Chelsea and Westminster and West Middlesex Hospitals have an action in place to clear their backlog of routine cases and have been running additional clinics to help reduce the numbers of women awaiting assessment

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