

Feedback from seldom heard groups on the final GP cervical screening invitation letter

Background

Cervical screening is a method of preventing cancer by detecting the Human papillomavirus (HPV) and abnormal cell changes in the cervix. Early detection and treatment can prevent 75% of cancers developing. The NHS Cervical Screening Programme is world class and has the best recorded outcomes globally. However, the number of women attending cervical screening appointments is falling.

From 2020 women approaching their twenty fifth birthday will be sent a written letter from the National Screening Programme inviting them to attend cervical HPV screening. If the person does not attend after the first letter is sent, a reminder letter will follow. If there is still no take up of the test, a third letter for this screening round will be sent directly from their GP practice.

Wessex Voices was asked to engage with women to find out how the last GP letter should be written and what it should include. As a guide, the Screening and Immunisation team at NHS England and NHS Improvement -South East Region (Hampshire, Isle of Wight), said the letter needs to contain the following:

- Details of or reference to HPV
- Where to go for more info
- What to do if the woman currently has symptoms
- Details of how to book your screening
- A GP endorsement

A draft letter of invitation from GP for Cervical HPV Screening can be seen in Appendix 1.

Discussion groups

Wessex Voices arranged to meet with three groups of people who are less likely to go to cervical screening. At each group, we introduced the topic and asked women to read the draft letter and allowed time for consideration and feedback. The letter was also read out and translated for non-English speaking individuals. We modified our approach so that it was appropriate to each group.

On the day all those we engaged with said they would attend an invitation for screening.

A Black and ethnic minority group of women

Six Black and minority ethnic women gave us their feedback.

Comments about the letter included:

- “The letter should address me using my first name”.
- “I like the letter. It is a bit long though”.
- The fifth paragraph starting with, “Our staff screen hundreds of women each year,” should be moved to second paragraph.
- Highlight, e.g. using bold, the offer of range of appointments and that you can express a preference to see either a man or women to do the screening.
- The sentence that starts ‘Without screening’ needs to finish with “and could save your life.”

Comments about the screening process:

- Muslim women said it would be better to send this directly to the personal email or text women in their community preferably in their own language because male household members are likely to deal with incoming post and discard this sort of letter, without showing the recipient.
- Polish women take screening seriously and often access screening in Poland when visiting. They are not always aware of NHS screening. Some non-English speaking Polish women are likely to throw away formal correspondence without opening letters if they are written in English. A different approach may be required to invite Polish women to attend by writing in their own language, including text or email.
- Letters need to be made readily available in other languages e.g. Arabic, French, Polish and other Eastern European languages, Urdu, Bangla, Punjabi, Hindi and Gujarati.
- Some women would prefer to make an appointment online without having to explain what they need the appointment for.

Learning Disabilities Group

Six adults with learning difficulties gave us their feedback.

Comments about the letter included:

- “The letter should say my name, Dear Jane.”
- “I would like the letter to say, ‘We are inviting you and other people of your age to come for an appointment GP for screening’ and ‘I would like to know the test is not just for me on my own’”.

- The group said they think it is important for the letter to say at the top of the letter ‘please read this letter - it is important and could save your life.’
- “I would like to see a picture of another person who has had the test and see their story. Maybe someone famous.”
- Offer longer times for appointments and ask people to tell you what would make them more comfortable.

Comments about the screening process:

- The letter should be in an accessible Easy Read. A template of the letter should be made available for all GPs to use.
- It would be useful to raise awareness of screening (if it is due for the individual) into any contact a woman with a learning disability has with their GP practice - e.g. at Annual Health Checks or appointments - so they can encourage people to attend.
- One GP practice that provides all the Annual Health Checks and screening for people with learning disabilities in their area would be a good idea.
- Some people can be very anxious and need help to stay calm and might need a quiet room to wait for their appointment.
- More time should be allowed for appointments with people with learning disabilities and staff should find out if there are any particular things that a person does not like such as a person getting too close to them without telling them first.

A group of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning people

We spoke to four individuals in total who are coming up to their 25th birthday. Two people identified as ‘FTM’ female to male.

Comments about the letter included:

- The letter should be addressed to first name of the person to avoid using a misgendering terms.
- “Change ‘I have noticed’ to ‘We have noticed,’ as it is not always the same GP we see and the GP practice staff need to be involved in treating me as their customer like anyone else.”
- Add in “We strongly encourage you to consider using this service.”
- Change the appointment sentence to “To make it as easy as possible for you we offer a range of appointments to suit you.”
- Recommended saying “Having cervical screening reduces the risk of developing cervical cancer and can give you some peace of mind.”

Comments about the screening process:

- Each person in this group said they would prefer to go to a specific practice or clinic where a nominated nurse could be especially trained and trusted as an LGBTQ aware practitioner to carry out the screening tests.

“It is important to know that when people are ‘FTM’ and undergoing ‘T’ hormone treatment there are considerable physical changes to their female genitalia. FTM people may have body dysphoria and these physical changes could seem weird to a nurse who doesn’t know. This would really help me feel a whole lot better about going to a screening appointment.”

- Two people identified as gender fluid expressed that they felt that they would like to feel comfortable about visiting a GP and should be addressed and treated using non gender specific language. This should be reflected in the language used in the letter and at the surgery.

- The article in this [link](#) describes some of the health disparities for LGBTQ women and may provide some insight to the uptake of screening:

Common themes

These are the common themes that the groups thought would encourage people to attend cervical screening are:

- All the people we spoke with said that the letter from the GP should be more personalised, including in the use of first names.
- The letter should be made available in all accessible formats. Texts and emails should also be available in other languages.
- It is important to highlight the offer of a range of appointment times, as is an offer of a longer appointment for those who may be anxious or have additional needs when attending.
- Offering a chat with a nurse to understand what might help people attend is helpful but the letter should also include the offer to book an appointment anonymously online.
- It would be helpful to include a sentence about all women aged 24 to 64 years old are invited to cervical screening so people know they are not being singled out and that this is something 'normal'.
- Two of the groups thought a message about this being potentially lifesaving would be useful. The other said that going for screening can bring peace of

mind.

For more information about this work

Please contact Sue Newell, Wessex Voices Project Manager at sue.newell@helpandcare.org.uk

Thank you

We would like to say a big thank you to the following organisations for enabling us to have conversations with the groups that they support:

- Dorset Race Equality Council
- Go Forum Poole
- Space Youth Group

Of course, we would also like to thank those who gave their time and feedback about the screening letter and process.

Appendix 1

Draft letter of invitation from GP - Cervical HPV Screening

Dear Ms Test,

I have noticed that you have not attended an appointment for NHS cervical screening at the surgery and, as your doctor; I would strongly encourage you to consider taking part.

Cervical screening is a test to find early cell changes which may go on to develop cancer if left untreated. Screening usually begins by testing a sample from the cervix (the neck of the womb) for the human papillomavirus (HPV), which can cause changes in these cells. By finding and treating cell changes early, we can stop up to 3 out of 4 (75%) of cervical cancers from developing.

Without screening, about one in 60 women will develop cervical cancer. Having cervical screening reduces the risk of developing cervical cancer.

To make it as easy as possible for you, we offer a wide range of appointments at various times of the day, including evening/early mornings/weekends: please ask reception for details on when you call to make your appointment on [telephone number]. Alternatively, please book online [provide details].

Our staff screen hundreds of women each year: we will ensure that your privacy and dignity are respected and that the procedure is as comfortable as possible. If you would like someone with you at your appointment, then please bring a friend or family member. If you would prefer, the practice can make a chaperone available. If you have a preference to be seen by a man or a woman, please let us know.

If you are uncertain or worried about having a cervical screening test please book an appointment or a telephone call to discuss your concerns with one of our nurses who will be able to help you.

There is lots of supportive information available from:

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions/cancer-of-the-cervix/Pages/Introduction.aspx

Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust: www.jostrust.org.uk/support/helpline or you can call their helpline on 0800 802 8000.

Please tell your GP as soon as possible if you have any symptoms, such as:

- bleeding between periods, after sex or after the menopause
- unusual vaginal discharge
- pain/discomfort during sex

If you have any queries and to book an appointment please call the practice on

xxxx xxxxxx

Your sincerely

Registered GP Full Name”