

Sexual Health Action Plan

2023 – 2026



Department of
Health



Public Health
Agency

This Action Plan has been developed by the Department of Health, working closely with the Public Health Agency, other government Departments and sexual health stakeholders. The plan aims to co-ordinate the ongoing direction for sexual health improvement in Northern Ireland and foster an environment of collaborative working to improve collective achievement of shared goals and outcomes, ultimately leading to better sexual health outcomes for the population.

The 'Tasks to consider' section sets out the main suggestions and current gaps that were identified during the engagement process. As there is no new funding associated with this plan, it will be for the established working group Chairs to prioritise tasks and activities required to take forward the agreed actions, in line with capacity and resources. It is intended that the Action Plan will function as a working document, to be reviewed and updated periodically in line with progress and developments in the areas below.

Objective	Description
1	Strive to eliminate new HIV transmissions in Northern Ireland and support people living with HIV to live well.
2	Reduce transmission of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).
3	Support choice over reproductive health and minimise the number of unintended pregnancies, with particular attention on teenage pregnancy.
4	Ensure equitable access in sexual health and reproduction services across the region.
5	Create a culture of openness about sexual and reproductive health and empower people with the information they need to make informed choices.
6	Establish effective mechanisms for optimal communication and collaboration with stakeholders and service providers.
7	Ensure a strong sexual health evidence base and identify best practice.

Strategic Objective 1: Strive to eliminate new HIV transmissions in Northern Ireland and support people living with HIV to live well.

Priority: Reduce new HIV infections and ensure prompt testing and diagnosis, improved public awareness and increased efforts to tackle stigma.

<u>Action</u>	<u>Tasks to consider</u>
Explore access to treatment and support services across region.	<p>Scoping exercise of HIV statutory and community services across NI, including for those who live with HIV, considering post-Covid recovery needs and service gaps.</p> <p>Examine PrEP take-up to establish who is and isn't availing of the treatment to inform targeted awareness raising.</p>
Explore becoming involved in the Fast Track Cities initiative to eliminate HIV.	Assess steps required for involvement in initiative and explore potential with councils and community voluntary sector (CVS).
Minimise late HIV diagnoses.	<p>Use surveillance data to create targeted awareness raising materials for key population groups.</p> <p>Building on existing initiatives, target low testing populations with awareness of testing opportunities.</p>
Identify and tackle key issues associated with specific at-risk groups.	<p>Determine at-risk groups and assess awareness, testing and service needs.</p> <p>Outside of specific sexual health considerations, assess the need for any additional HIV testing that may be beneficial amongst homeless population and high-risk drug user areas.</p> <p>Explore potential for wider access to testing and treatment for blood borne viruses across all needle and syringe exchange services, as part of the development and enhancement of core provision.</p>
Address public awareness and stigma.	<p>Continue to promote positive HIV messaging including U=U (undetectable=untransmissible) to public and professional audiences.</p> <p>Consider audiences for targeted prevention and awareness messaging.</p>
Identify and address any shortfalls in professional communications and understanding and identifying cases of HIV.	<p>Scope current support available for HSC professionals and address gaps in awareness, education and training materials when it comes to realities of HIV.</p> <p>Explore opportunities to consider improved information sharing between healthcare professionals, in relation to late diagnoses, to help facilitate learning and improvement.</p>

Strategic Objective 2: Reduce transmission of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

Priority: Reduce the incidence of STIs by identifying demographic or population trends and providing preventative measures and effective treatments.

<u>Action</u>	<u>Tasks to consider</u>
Identify target demographics or geographical locations for targeted awareness raising.	<p>Strengthen HIV and STI surveillance and establish quarterly monitoring reports, with particular attention on rising trends in chlamydia, gonorrhoea, and syphilis.</p> <p>Identify high risk groups and assess mechanisms for promoting the importance of sexual safety and testing.</p> <p>Promote access to STI testing and treatment through online and face-to-face services.</p>
Improve how we communicate with the public to help reduce transmission.	<p>Examine accessibility of information available to people who speak different languages.</p> <p>Consider best practice examples for improving partner notification.</p>
Scope opportunities for cross-border collaboration re outbreaks and awareness raising.	<p>Establish links with relevant colleagues in the Republic of Ireland to consider all-island best practice.</p> <p>Consider opportunities for joint communications to tackle all-island trends.</p>

Strategic Objective 3: Support choice over reproductive health and minimise the number of unintended pregnancies, with particular attention on teenage pregnancy.

Priority: Ensure access to contraception to reduce unintended pregnancies and ensure access to abortion services, supporting individual choice over reproductive health.

<u>Actions</u>	<u>Tasks to consider</u>
<p>Promote contraceptive services to target populations, including greater availability of emergency and bridging contraception.</p>	<p>Consider combined communications for pharmacy and online availability.</p> <p>Carry out a general assessment of community-based family planning services currently available across the region.</p> <p>Continue to monitor trends in teenage pregnancy and consider additional contraception knowledge needs for younger girls and boys, including working with the Department of Education (DE) to support school education.</p> <p>Work with people from specific need groups to examine contraception and information needs, including minority ethnic populations, Trans people, learning disability.</p> <p>Consider fact-based awareness raising of contraceptive options for the population to tackle myths and untruths, specifically utilising the wide range of social media platforms.</p> <p>Additional post-partum and post-abortion contraceptive advice and services to be considered and included in standard pathway.</p> <p>Explore access to contraception via primary care.</p>
<p>Ensure public information is widely available regarding options available in the case of unintended pregnancy, including highlighting availability of abortion services.</p>	<p>Support the rollout of communications for Early Medical Abortion and other sexual and reproductive health services.</p> <p>Inclusion of abortion services in public materials as an option for those who wish to consider it in dealing with unintended pregnancy.</p>
<p>Assess community availability of free condoms (also contributing factor to HIV and STI priorities).</p>	<p>Determine current availability of access to condoms and scope options for further rollout, as required.</p> <p>Roll out the C-Card condom service in Northern Ireland.</p>

Strategic Objective 4: Ensure equitable access in sexual health and reproduction services across the region.

Priority: Ensure that all people have timely and equitable access to high quality sexual health services in settings appropriate to their needs.

<u>Actions</u>	<u>Tasks to consider</u>
<p>Stocktake of current sexual health service provision.</p>	<p>Map current service provision across CVS and Trusts.</p> <p>Review allocation of CVS resources in line with revised priorities.</p> <p>Explore specific needs of populations who have more complex needs in relation to sexual and reproductive health (e.g., traveller community, those with learning disabilities, ethnic minority groups, religious traditions)</p>
<p>Ensure those working in areas of HSC are supported to promote positive sexual health and to utilise patient contacts to identify patients at risk of harm.</p>	<p>Make every HSC contact count in identifying domestic and sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation.</p> <p>Consider workforce needs across sexual and reproductive health services.</p> <p>Implement across Trusts the Personal and Sexual Relationships Operational Protocol and Guidelines for Adults with Learning Disabilities</p> <p>Improve patient experience and access by exploring how primary and community care can better support sexual health needs, particularly where there are geographical gaps in secondary care services.</p> <p>Consider priority communications and awareness materials with frontline HSC and community staff, including exploration of service directory.</p>

Strategic Objective 5: Create a culture of openness about sexual and reproductive health and empower people with the information they need to make informed choices.

Priority: Promote a culture of openness about sexual and reproductive health, safety and wellbeing which encourages respect and positive attitudes for all.

<u>Actions</u>	<u>Tasks to consider</u>
<p>Revitalise public messages promoting good sexual health and safety.</p>	<p>Develop and deliver a positive sexual health public campaign.</p> <p>Consider utilising 'Living Well' health promotion service.</p> <p>Examine current advice lines and identify promotional opportunities.</p> <p>Using effective communications and utilising social media opportunities, target at-risk individuals re STIs and wider sexual safety, giving due consideration to the different needs of groups and individuals.</p> <p>Consider strategic partnerships with significant events and festivals to better promote positive, evidence-based sexual health promotion messages.</p> <p>Plan a series of communications linked with appropriate awareness days or public events (e.g., sexual health week, World AIDS day).</p>
<p><i>Priority: Provide age-appropriate information to all to enable the population to develop and maintain the knowledge and skills necessary for making informed choices when considering or engaging in sexual activity.</i></p>	
<p>Ensure evidence-based sexual health, consent and relationship information is available to school-aged children, adolescents and young adults.</p>	<p>Work with DE to consider opportunities for the further development of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in the curriculum.</p> <p>Build links with Council for the Curriculum, Examinations a& Assessment (CCEA) to further support evidence-based development of RSE Hub for teachers.</p> <p>Work with young people to explore the needs they have when it comes to sexual health information.</p> <p>Building on existing links with Further Education Colleges and Universities, consider options to strengthen the promotion of good sexual health.</p>
<p>Ensure accessible, accurate information is available for all.</p>	<p>Review, refresh and promote NI's sexual health website.</p> <p>Consider the specific knowledge and information needs of other key groups outside of younger people.</p> <p>Explore the further development and regionalise the Western Trust SH&U App.</p> <p>Promote the Leaving Prostitution Z-Card to help connect individuals to a range of existing services.</p>

Strategic Objective 6: Establish effective mechanisms for optimal communication and collaboration with stakeholders and service providers.

Priority: Collaborate to optimise and prioritise use of limited resources, support knowledge exchange, ensure effective communications between partners.

<u>Actions</u>	<u>Tasks to consider</u>
<p>Improve communications with the Community & Voluntary Sector.</p>	<p>Consider new mechanisms for regular updates with CVS, including updating a central list of Sexual Health Improvement Network (SHIN) partners for information sharing and explore a platform for 'community of interest' engagement.</p> <p>Consider how relevant service updates and developments can be promptly communicated from HSC Trusts to the community/voluntary sector.</p>
<p>Utilise Action Plan structures to improve links between commissioning, prevention, early intervention and service development.</p>	<p>Identify opportunities for improved communication with and between HSC Sexual Health teams.</p> <p>Explore options for moving towards common language used across Trusts when it comes to sexual health service terminology</p> <p>Assessment of current investment across sexual health (PHA, CVS, Trusts)</p>
<p>Develop appropriate Action Plan engagement structures.</p>	<p>Reformat the SHIN structures to align with delivery of the Action Plan.</p> <p>Devise new governance arrangements to facilitate effective monitoring and delivery of action plan objectives.</p> <p>Host annual update event with stakeholders in relation to plan progress.</p>

Strategic Objective 7: Ensure a strong sexual health evidence base and identify best practice.

Priority: Continue to review the evidence base to understand personal sexual behaviours and choices, as well as evidence for prevention and treatment of key sexual and reproductive health issues.

<u>Actions</u>	<u>Tasks to consider</u>
Create UK/ROI policy network.	<p>Establish an information sharing group for sexual health promotion policy leads in UK and Ireland.</p> <p>Scope differences in policy and research and consider ways to fill local gaps.</p>
Improve understanding of trends and emerging risks.	<p>Explore opportunities for greater collaboration with local universities regarding sexual health research.</p> <p>Establish mechanisms for SHIN members to share research and good practice, and to facilitate engagement relating to priority action areas.</p> <p>Consider research needs re population attitudes and behaviours and assess feasibility of participating in available local and national surveys where appropriate e.g., National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes & Lifestyles (NATSAL), NI Health Survey.</p>