Written evidence from London Councils

London Councils represents London’s 32 borough councils and the City of London. It is a cross party organisation that works on behalf of all its member authorities regardless of political persuasion.

Introduction

London Councils represents London’s thirty-two boroughs and the City of London. We make the case to government, the Mayor and others to get the best deal for Londoners and to ensure that our member authorities have the resources, freedoms and powers necessary to improve the health, wellbeing and prosperity of residents and local businesses.

London Councils welcomes the opportunity to submit views to the Sexual Health Inquiry undertaken by the Health and Social Care Committee. Maintaining good sexual health for Londoners is important to boroughs, as it forms an essential element of good health and well-being.

STI rates in London

London boroughs recognise that the rate of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is significantly higher in London than in the rest of England. Recent PHE data reported more than 117,000 new STIs were diagnosed in London in 2017. London boroughs make up 17 out of the top 20 authorities with the highest prevalence of diagnosed STIs. Tackling this issue is a priority for boroughs, and they are working to improve sexual health outcomes and reverse the increase by encouraging testing and reducing transmission.

We are pleased that the prevalence data for some types of STIs are decreasing. For example, rates of genital herpes saw a 5% decrease between 2016 and 2017. There has been a continued fall in new diagnoses of ano-genital warts, declining by a third in heterosexual males and females under 25 since 2013. This is an encouraging trend. However, London has also seen long term increases in new diagnoses of syphilis and gonorrhoea over the past decade, with further increases in syphilis (16%) and gonorrhoea (23%) in 2017. This remains a cause for concern as it appears that despite actions to improve sexual health and levels of testing, there is still more that might be done together with the risks of multi-drug resistant gonorrhoea and the long term risks of undiagnosed and untreated syphilis.

In 2017, London saw the second year of falls in new HIV diagnoses. There were 1,549 new diagnoses of HIV in 2017, a fall of 37.4% since 2015. This reduction is significantly greater than the national average reduction of 27.6%, although London’s rate of new diagnoses remains significantly higher than the rest of the country. Uptake of the 5,700 places on the IMPACT trial of PrEP by gay, bisexual and men who have sex with men during 2017-18 was very rapid in London, although as in the rest of the country uptake among other people at risk, including heterosexual women and men from African communities, has been gradual. As part of the boost to the trial, a further 1,900 places are being made available in the capital currently.

1 Spotlight on Sexually Transmitted Infections in London, Public Health England 2017
In January 2018 London became a signatory to the international UNAIDS/IAPAC HIV Fast Track Cities\(^2\) Initiative. This was signed by four signatory bodies; including London Councils; the Mayor of London; Public Health England and NHS England. This brings together all the organisations involved in HIV prevention, treatment and support of people living with, or at risk of HIV. London is one of only three global cities to have exceeded the original goals as set out in the Paris Declaration signed in 2014 \(t\) (90% of people knowing their status; 90% of people with diagnosed HIV infection receiving sustained antiretroviral (ARV) therapy and 90% of people receiving therapy achieving viral suppression). London is one of only three global cities (Amsterdam and Melbourne) to have already achieved the UN's 90:90:90 targets with 90%: 97%: 97%. Addressing stigma has been identified as one of the areas where London needs to improve with results from the 2017 Positive Voices survey indicating 33% had been diagnosed with depression and 26% with anxiety, underlining a need for London to learn from other cities about how to reduce stigma and discrimination.

Teenage pregnancy rates in London have continued to fall, and have fallen below the rate in the rest of the country. In 2016, London's rate was 17.1 per 1,000 15-17 year-old young women, compared with the national rate of 18.8.

Use of Long Acting Reversible Contraception (LARC) is notably lower across London as a whole compared with the rest of England, which is a long term trend. Sexual health services prescribe the majority of long acting reversible contraception across the capital, whereas nationally it is primary care. With the move to new integrated sexual health services, described below, services are beginning to report significant increases in women choosing LARC which should help to close the gap between London and the rest of the country in use of the most effective forms of contraception.

London sexual health services provide significantly greater access and testing than in the rest of the country. In 2017, London had 155% more sexual health attendances per capita than the rest of the country and just over 180% more screens for STIs and HIV. Since transition to local authorities in 2013, attendances had increased by 16% by 2017, and screens by 24%. Among gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men, the increases have been even more significant, with screens increasing by 87%. Increased and more regular testing is particularly important since many infections may be asymptomatic and may otherwise be missed, or only diagnosed much later at the point of ill health caused by the infection, and early treatment and partner notification reduces the risk of transmission to others.

London boroughs commission sexual health services from a range of providers - contributing to a complex set of arrangements. This includes sexual health clinics, additional services from GPs, community pharmacies and voluntary sector partners.

As a capital city, London is facing some unique challenges, more pronounced than the rest of the country. London’s population is already exceeding earlier estimates. According to the ONS 2017 mid-year, London’s current population is 8,825\(^3\) million. This has grown from 8,416 million in 2013\(^4\), an increase of around 409,000 (4.9%). As described above, demand for sexual health services is growing at a considerably faster rate than population growth.

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\(^2\) Fast Track Cities [http://www.iapac.org/cities/](http://www.iapac.org/cities/)

\(^3\) [https://data.london.gov.uk/demography/](https://data.london.gov.uk/demography/)

There are more young people living in the capital the rest of England. In London, heterosexuals aged between 15 and 24 years old account for more than 36% of all new STIs diagnosed in 2017. This would suggest that despite public awareness campaigns, younger people are still more likely to take greater risks with regard to their sexual health. Black African and Afro Caribbean minority groups also feature disproportionately, reflecting London’s diverse population. There is also awareness of the relative population churn reflecting diverse groups both entering and leaving the city.

London’s population has high levels of need for sexual health, with higher proportions of the populations particularly at risk of adverse outcomes compared with the rest of the country including: young people and young adults; men and women from BME communities; and gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men. Across these groups, socio-economic deprivation, discrimination and disadvantage contribute to increased levels of risk.

Overall, the anticipated population growth, combined with London’s relatively young and diverse population as well as our drive to increase testing, will lead to an inevitable increase in demand for services set within the context of a tight public health funding framework.

**Funding for sexual health services**

The transfer of responsibilities has enabled boroughs to play a crucial role in addressing the wider determinants of health and they have the ability to demonstrate how they are able to improve the sexual and reproductive health of their communities through locally-led and evidence-based decisions.

In October 2015, as a result of an in-year budget cut and a planned reduction of the Public Health Grant, public health budgets were reduced significantly. Between 2015 and 2020, local authorities will be required to make a sustained reduction of funding, resulting in a loss of approximately £70 million. London’s per capita spend reduced from £81 to £69 in 2019/2020, reflecting a 15% decrease in per capita allocation. This has adversely influenced boroughs in terms of their spending decisions on non-prescribed activities such as drug and alcohol services.

The total public health grant for London according to the revenue outturn data for 2016/2017 was £693 million, with the total net expenditure of £169 million spent on STI testing, contraception prevention, treatment and advice services.

Continuing growth in demand, for services which constitute a substantial proportion of a budget that is being cut successively by central government, means that councils are working together to transform services in order to sustain open access services and meet changing needs in the population. Local authorities have protected and committed to long term funding for sexual health services. This is evidenced by new contracts being agreed across the capital with NHS trusts and the commitment to also fund a new London e-service. However, continuing cuts, together with new interventions such as PrEP and Mycoplasma genitalium, will place increasing pressure on the ability of budgets and services to meet demand.

The challenge continues for boroughs. London Councils believes that sustained public health funding cuts is short-sighted and undermines boroughs’ ability to make the longer-term health improvements that are needed.

**London boroughs working together to tackle sexual health**
London boroughs are leading the way in response to funding challenges by seeking to transform the traditional service model to meet the increasing demand and reflect societal changes in the way Londoners access services in the 21st Century. A major innovation in London is the London Sexual Health Programme. This project is a unique partnership between London boroughs in terms of scale and complexity, working together to support open access sexual health services. As part of the changes, some clinic sites and services have changed and a new online London service has been introduced. These changes are focused on creating a new, sustainable model for participating authorities in London that offers greater choice and improved access and capacity, together with more efficient use of resources.

New service specifications and contracts have been procured and commissioned across participating London authorities over the past year and a half, offering integrated sexual health services for contraception, HIV testing and diagnosis and STI testing, diagnosis and treatment. Previously, these services were often provided separately and funded via different methods: the new services bring these together, and are popular with service users, particularly younger adults, who are able to access their contraceptive and STI needs together in one place.

The new online Sexual Health London service was launched in January 2018. It is currently available to residents across 27 boroughs and means that 7 million Londoners have access to an online sexual health self-sampling, testing and treatment service for free. The service specification was developed by the Programme’s clinical advisory group, and is intended for people who do not report symptoms of an STI or have other risks or needs that should be seen in a clinic.

People can order self-sampling kits online to be delivered to their home or collect them from local clinics, which they then return for freepost. People can then track their results through an online account and get comprehensive follow-up treatment from clinics or through the post if applicable.

In the nine months since it was launched, Sexual Health London has sent out just over 60,000 kits to people in London. 79% of kits have been returned, and over 1,000 treatment kits for people with uncomplicated chlamydia have been sent to people through the post following further assessment for suitability of home treatment. Service user feedback has been very positive, with over 98% of people saying they would recommend the Sexual Health London service to friends and family.

The service is designed to work with and complement clinics, with clinics providing follow up support to people who need treatment after using the online service, and staff in clinics can use the Sexual Health London portal to access patients’ records. The service currently works with thirteen NHS trusts across London, and kits can be accessed in clinic, via clinic websites and through the SHL.uk website.

Another approach being taken in the capital to reduce HIV infection is the London HIV Prevention Programme (LHPP). HIV is a major public health concern in London, with nearly 37,000 people living with the condition. The objective is to reduce the incidence of HIV infection in Greater London.

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5 Sexual Health London [https://www.shl.uk/](https://www.shl.uk/)
The key elements of the programme include a condom distribution scheme, an outreach programme and a large scale regional media campaign called ‘Do It London’. The economies of scale achieved by the programme, for example through a single digital website and the delivery of effective London-wide messaging, are seen as a particular success. Borough contributions to fund the programme are based on each borough’s share of the total diagnosed HIV prevalence in London. The total budget for the programme is £1.2 million per year (2015/2017).

In September 2018, Public Health England data revealed new HIV diagnoses among gay and bisexual men since 2015 has decreased by 44%, from 1,415 in 2015 to 798 in 2017. This is the second year where there has been a significant decrease. The LHPP’s activities and reach play a pivotal role in these important gains. It has innovated through its campaigns and work in how health promotion can drive combination approaches to reducing HIV, alongside earlier starts on anti-retroviral therapy (ART); early promotion of PrEP and recognising the increasing complexity of how HIV prevention work; based on deep insight into high risk groups among MSM. The Programme as part of the outreach and promoting access to HIV testing work is also testing MSM groups for HIV and STIs - contributing to the effort to reduce STIs among MSM who feature among the high risk groups for STIs.

The recent winter evaluation of the scheme has shown that 73% of all respondents familiar with the ‘Do It London’ campaign felt it had influenced their behaviour towards testing, with 64% feeling the campaign had influenced their sexual behaviour.

Since its launch, the ‘Do It London’ campaign has delivered 68 million digital display advert impressions on Londoners’ mobiles, tablets and laptops. It has appeared on at least 30,000 ad panels inside London Underground Tube trains, just over 20,000 ad panels inside London’s buses and nearly 17,000 street-side adverts. A total of 5 million free condoms have been issued between 2014 and mid-2018.

Conclusion

London Councils believes that boroughs are performing well despite public health funding pressures. However, it is imperative to continue sustainable investment in sexual health prevention if we are to tackle the challenges that lay ahead in London.

London Councils is of the view that sexual health services represent both a universal need across the community and across the age range, but also provide a vital service to people who need to be protected and who are at vulnerable stages in their lives. This includes those who have been sexually exploited and abused, victims of domestic violence and trafficking.

It is vital that the government consider the anticipated population growth and changes in population need, including new innovations such as PrEP, in London when making new public health funding decisions from 2019. We believe that only by ensuring appropriate and equitable funding for local authorities will it be possible to safeguard and protect the services to


7 ‘Do It London’ https://doitlondon.org/
reduce the social and economic consequences of HIV, STIs and unplanned pregnancies and improve the sexual health of Londoners.