

Q&As restoring and recovering NHS Breast Screening services in the East of England

How has screening been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?

Since March 2020, NHS Breast Screening services have been affected by a range of clinical and operational impacts due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst NHS England and Improvement did not issue any national directive to change screening services, local breast screening services took the decision to reschedule appointments and invitations for tests to a later date to protect patients from the virus and redeploy staff to support coronavirus-related work. Since that time NHS England and Improvement, as commissioners of breast screening services, have been working with providers to restore services, focussing on the highest priority patient groups first.

When will these services be back to normal?

A reduction in screening capacity has been inevitable due to the requirements for personal protective equipment, enhanced infection control and social distancing to ensure that staff and clients stay safe. This, in conjunction with the pause in issuing invitations, has unfortunately resulted in a backlog of those who are due appointments. We have put plans in place to address this backlog so that the screening service can be reinstated.

Now that services are being restored, who will take priority for screening

Guidance has already been issued to services on phase 1 of restoration and recovery to ensure that women who are high risk, have screened positive, whose results were not processed or who were invited but not screened, are invited and have their screening pathway completed. Following this, people who were delayed an invitation will be invited for screening.

For those delayed an invitation (phase 2 of restoration and recovery) guidance will be to select women based on the priorities below:

1. Women aged 53 and not previously invited
2. Women aged 71+ who were due screening pre-Covid-19 but who have not been screened
3. Women aged 50 to 70 years

The following women will not receive any invitations until further notice:

- Self-referrals aged 71 or over

Any women aged 71 or over who contact the service to request an appointment will be advised that self-referrals are not currently available. If women notice any symptoms, they should contact their GP.

- Women in the AgeX trial

Women who were already invited or due an invitation prior to screening being rescheduled will continue to be issued an invite for breast screening as part of the AgeX trial. On completion of screening for these women, all further screening invitations will not include AgeX women until further notice.

Why are women aged 71 not able to self-refer at the moment?

The immediate priority for the programme is to make sure women that have been identified as being at higher risk (for example because they have a faulty gene which puts them at higher risk of developing breast cancer) are offered the opportunity for a screen as soon as possible. The programme is also prioritising women aged 53 who are due their first screen, and those who have passed their 71st birthday and are waiting for their final routine screen. This is being kept under close review. Any woman who is concerned about symptoms of breast cancer should speak to her GP as soon as possible.



What is the AgeX trial and why has it been paused?

Women are first invited for screening within 3 years of their 50th birthday. In some parts of England, the screening programme has been inviting women from 47 to 73 years old as part of the AgeX trial.

The trial is to examine the effectiveness of offering some women 1 extra screen between the ages of 47 and 49, or 1 between the ages of 71 and 73. It has been paused to allow breast screening services to prioritise:

- women clinically diagnosed as being at very high risk of breast cancer
- women who need more tests following their last screening
- women who have been invited for screening but not yet seen
- women aged from 50 to their 71st birthday due their routine screening.

The trial is being kept under review.

Why are most providers moving to open invitations?

In order to fully reinstate routine breast screening services and best address the backlog, a national decision has been taken, initially as an interim measure, to encourage providers to move to issuing open invitations for routine clients where possible, as opposed to the usual timed appointments. This is intended to make the best use of the capacity available by reducing Do Not Attend (DNA) rates and thereby maximising the numbers of women screened.

Some providers will be opting not to move to an open invitation system, e.g. if they are a small provider, have no screening backlog or high numbers of people without English as a first language in their population. High risk clients and those with a learning disability will continue to be issued with timed appointments.

A number of East of England providers will move to open invitations from mid-August with more following on 30 September 2020. Where adopted, open invitations will initially be in place until 31 March 2021.

When will invitations for screening be sent out for those whose invitations have been delayed?

A number of East of England providers will move to open invitations in mid-August with more following on 30 September 2020. Open invitation letters will ask women to contact the service to book a convenient appointment by phone or email.

Will this change put some groups at a disadvantage?

Many women may find the open invitation system more convenient in being able to book an appointment to suit them. We know that the use of open invitations may adversely impact some groups e.g. where English is not the first language or for those with verbal communication difficulties. For those providers moving to an open invitation system any disadvantages need to be balanced against the impact of the backlog leading to increasing the screening round further beyond 36 months. We will be working with providers to identify any issues and how we can mitigate these.

We have asked GPs to alert the screening provider to patients with special needs to ensure that reasonable adjustment can be offered. This is especially important for first-time attendees.

What do I need to know about attending a breast screening appointment?

If you are invited for an appointment, we would encourage you to attend. The NHS has safety measures in place to minimise the risk of people getting coronavirus:

- social distancing will be observed
- there will be additional infection control procedures and clinical staff will be wearing personal protective equipment such as face masks
- your appointment may be at a clinic that is not your usual venue and the appointment may take longer than usual.

Please **do not** attend an appointment if you or any member of your household are suffering from any of the symptoms associated with Covid-19 or are self-isolating. If this applies to you, please contact your local screening service so that you can reschedule your appointment for a different time.

If you are identified as clinically extremely vulnerable, please contact the screening provider to let them know.

In line with government advice, you should wear a face covering to your appointment. This can be a mask that you have bought or made, a face covering worn for religious or cultural reasons (as long as they cover the mouth and nose) or a surgical mask you have been given because you are shielding.

When travelling to and from your appointment, please follow guidelines which include keeping a safe distance from others and travelling by car, bike or walking if possible. Where possible wash your hands regularly and use hand sanitiser.

As always, anyone who is worried or has symptoms is encouraged to contact their GP practice for advice.