

# Sub-Committee of the health overview and scrutiny committee

## NHS Cancer Screening Programmes update

### Introduction

Screening is a way of identifying apparently healthy people who are at higher risk of developing a particular condition. It plays a key role in early diagnosis and effective treatment by allowing treatment of a condition before it becomes more serious and difficult to treat. It is estimated that screening programmes in England save around 10,000 lives a year, through prevention and early diagnosis.<sup>1</sup> Screening programmes are implemented when there is evidence that the benefits of screening outweigh potential harms.

There are three national cancer screening programmes in England. These are cervical screening, bowel cancer screening, and breast screening. In addition, targeted lung health checks are being rolled out across England and are now available in Barnet. Targeted Lung Health Checks will eventually transition into the fourth national cancer screening programme by 2028.

This report presents the cancer screening programmes and their coverage in Barnet and compares this with North Central London and England averages. Inequalities in cancer screening are discussed, followed by local strategies and work to tackle inequalities, and increase cancer screening uptake.

### Cervical screening in Barnet

#### **Cervical Screening**

The NHS Cervical screening programme is offered to people with a cervix from 25 to 64 years of age. Routine screening is offered every three years up to 49 years of age and every five years from 50 to 64 years of age. Depending on the result of the screen, people may be recalled earlier than these routine intervals.<sup>2</sup>

The test involves using a soft brush to take a small sample of cells from the surface of the cervix. All samples taken at cervical screening appointments are tested for high-risk Human Papillomavirus (HPV) in the first instance. This is the virus that causes nearly all cervical cancers. Samples that test positive undergo further analysis with Liquid Based Cytology to detect cell abnormalities. This identifies people at risk of cervical cancer earlier.

In Barnet, eligible people receive a letter inviting them to make an appointment for cervical screening at their GP surgery. The test is usually carried out by a nurse in the GP surgery.

#### **Cervical screening coverage in Barnet**

Figure 1 shows cervical screening coverage in Barnet primary care networks (PCNs) for people aged 25 - 49 years, and Figures 2 and 3 show coverage for people aged 25 - 49 and 50 – 64 in 2022/23. Cervical screening coverage is the proportion of individuals in the resident population eligible for

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/terms-of-reference-review-national-cancer-screening-programmes-england/>

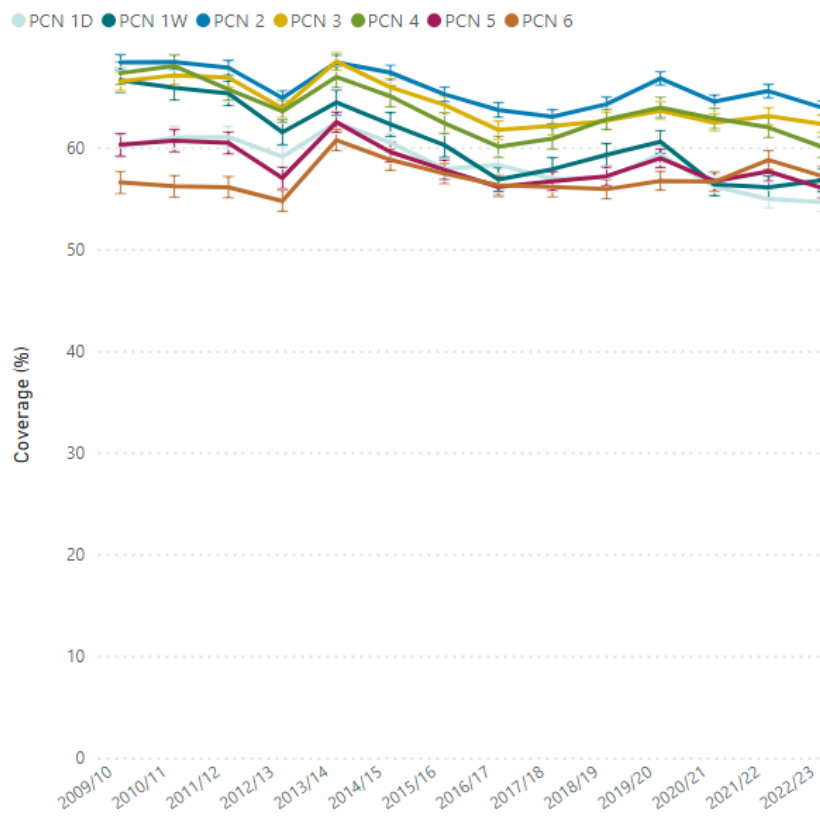
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/cancer/early-diagnosis/screening-and-earlier-diagnosis/>

cervical screening who were screened adequately within the previous 3.5 years (for ages 25 to 49 years) and 5.5 years (for ages 50 to 64 years).

Cervical screening coverage is higher in people aged 50 – 64 years, compared with those aged 25 – 49 years, as shown in Figures 2 and 3. Coverage is generally below the England average, and all PCNs are below the national acceptable threshold for cervical screening coverage of 80%.

There has been a steady decline in cervical screening nationally since 2009/10 with some improvements seen following large scale national or regional campaigns. The decline has been attributed to a number of factors including an increase in the number of people eligible for screening as well as a reduction of screening in settings such as sexual health clinics.

**Figure 1** – Cervical screening coverage in people with a cervix aged 25 – 49 years over time<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> All charts in this report are from Barnet Insight and Intelligence Team Cancer Screening Dashboard

Figure 2 - Cervical screening coverage in people with a cervix aged 25-49 years, 2022/23, in Barnet PCNs, with England, NCL and Barnet averages.

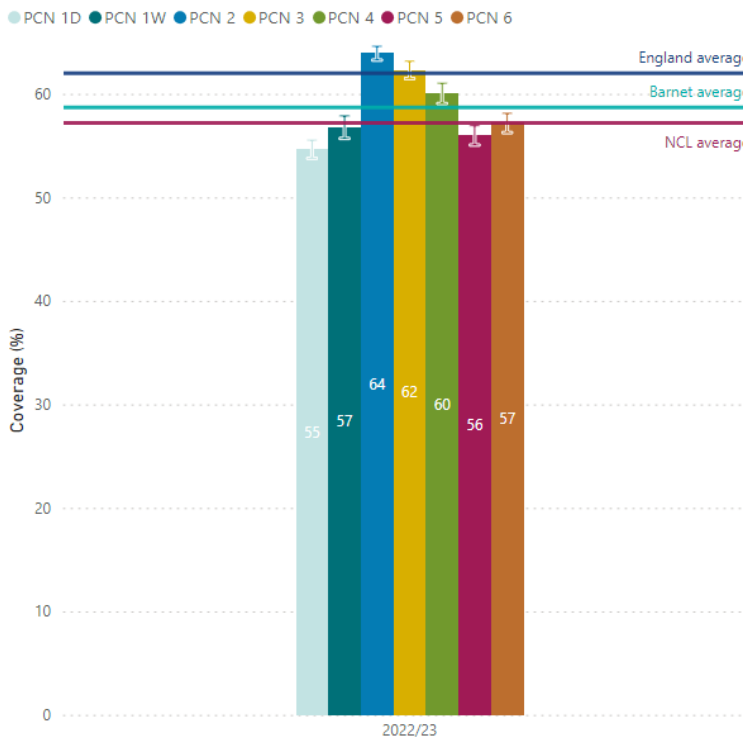
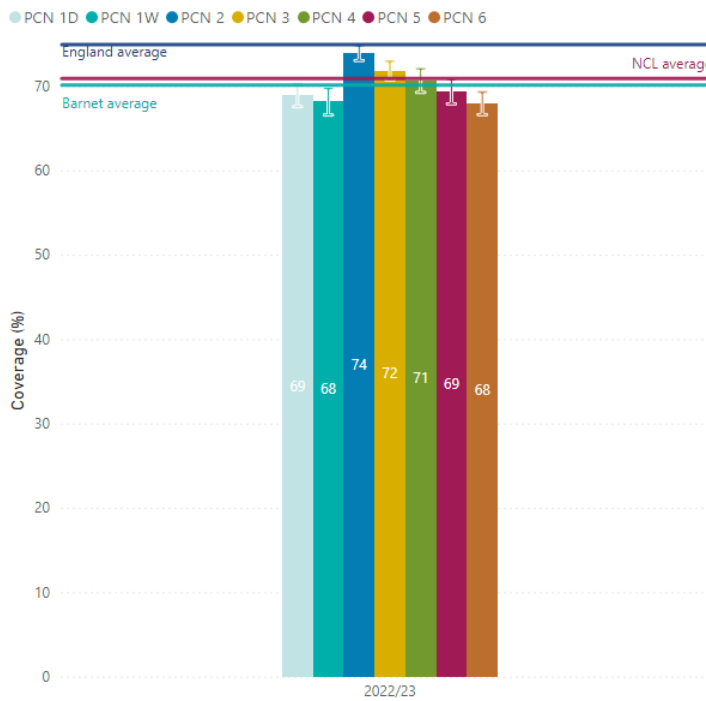


Figure 3 – Cervical screening coverage in people with a cervix aged 50 - 64 years, 2022/23, in Barnet PCNs, with England, NCL and Barnet averages.



## Bowel cancer screening in Barnet

### **Bowel cancer screening**

The NHS Bowel Cancer Screening Programme is offered to everyone aged 60-74. Since 2021, the age eligibility started to expand to include people aged 50 - 59 years. In Barnet, people aged 54 years and above are being invited. During 2024/25, those aged 52 and 50 will start receiving invites.

The screening uses a home-testing kit to collect a sample of faeces, which is then sent to the lab and checked for tiny amounts of blood which could be caused by cancer. In 2019, the home testing kit was changed from the guaiac Faecal Occult Blood Test (gFOBT) to the Faecal Immunochemical Test (FIT) because it is more accurate and easier to use.

Those who are eligible are sent an NHS bowel cancer screening kit every two years.

### **Bowel screening coverage in Barnet**

Figure 4 shows bowel screening coverage in Barnet PCNs over time, and compared with the England and North Central London (NCL) averages. Coverage is the proportion of eligible people in the resident population who had an adequate FIT screening result in the previous 30 months.

Bowel screening coverage has increased over recent years, since the introduction of the FIT screening. Coverage did not decline during the COVID-19 pandemic (declines have been noted in other cancer screening programmes). Coverage of bowel screening in Barnet is lower than the England average, but generally higher than the NCL average.

The national acceptable target is 52%.

**Figure 4 – Bowel cancer screening coverage in people aged 60 – 74 years over time**

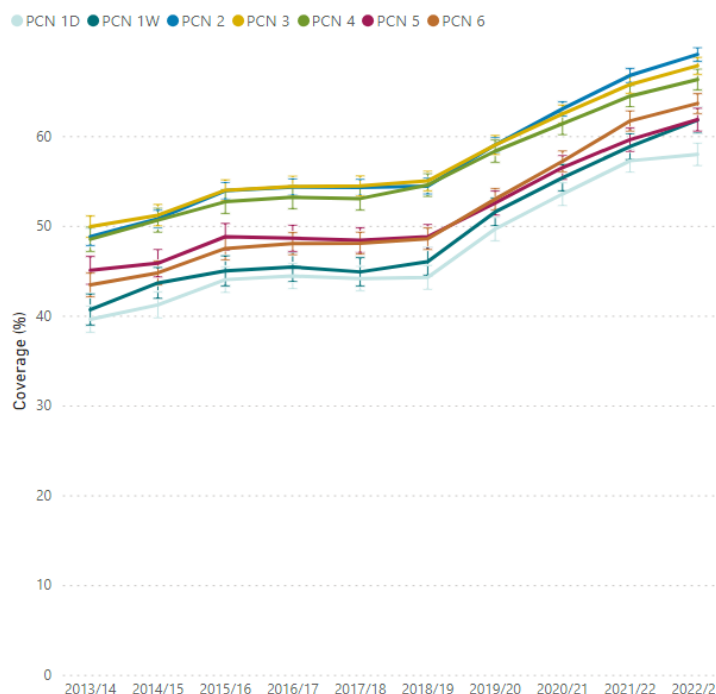
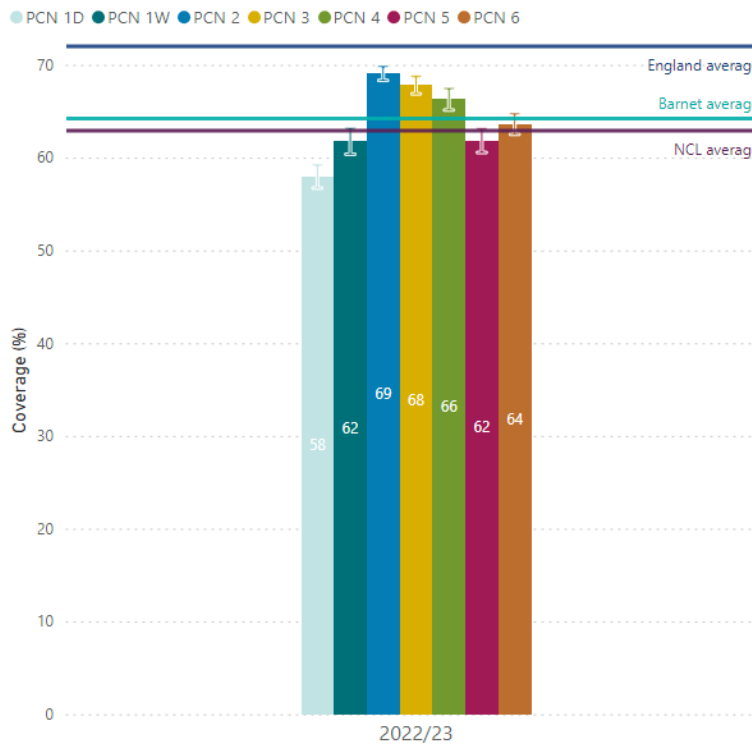


Figure 5 – Bowel cancer screening coverage in people aged 60–74 years, 2022/23, in Barnet PCNs, with England, NCL and Barnet averages



## Breast Screening in Barnet

### Breast Screening

Breast screening is offered to women aged 50 until their 71<sup>st</sup> birthday in England and occurs every three years. Women aged 71 years or over do not receive screening invitations but can arrange an appointment themselves, by contacting the local screening unit.

The screening test uses an X-ray test called a mammogram that can detect cancers when they are too small to see or feel. If a specialist identifies features which are indicative of breast cancer, then the individual will be offered further investigation.

There are several breast screening units in North London, where mammograms take place. In Barnet there are screening units at Edgware Community Hospital and Finchley Memorial Hospital.

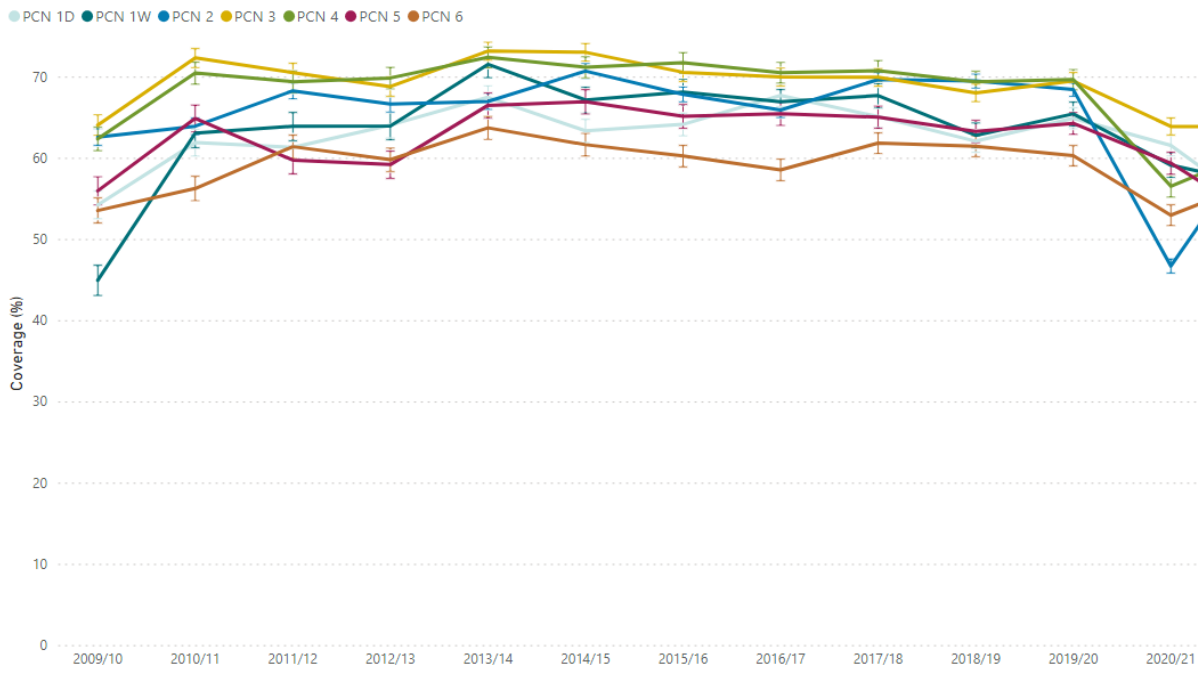
### Breast screening coverage in Barnet

Figures 6 and 7 show breast screening coverage in Barnet PCNs, and with the England and North Central London averages. Breast screening coverage is the proportion of eligible women in the resident population who have had a breast screening test result in the past 36 months.

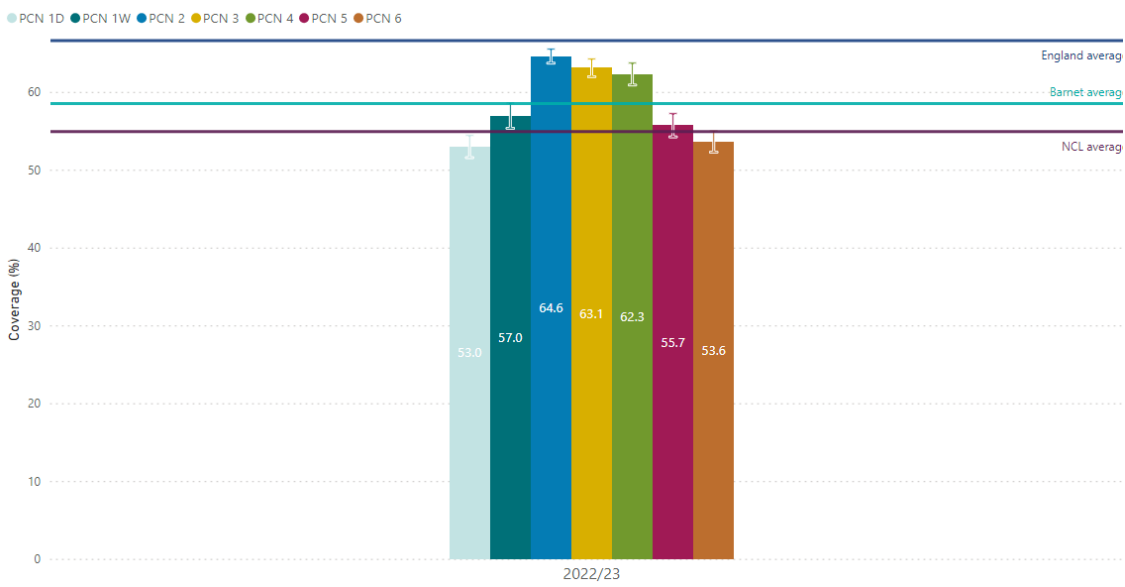
The data collection methodology for the data on Figures 6 and 7 changed between 2021/22 and 2022/23, which explains why the line chart stops in 2021/22 in Figure 6, and Figure 7 is for the 2022/23 values. There was a decrease in breast screening during the COVID-19 pandemic this is reflected in the decreased coverage in Figure 6. In 2022/23, breast screening coverage in Barnet was

higher than the NCL average, but lower than the England average. All Barnet PCNs were below the national acceptable threshold of 70%.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 6** – Breast screening coverage in those aged 50-70 years, in Barnet PCNs over time



**Figure 7** – Breast screening coverage in those aged 53-70 years, 2022/23 in Barnet PCNs, with England and NCL averages



<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/breast-screening-consolidated-programme-standards/nhs-breast-screening-programme-screening-standards-valid-for-data-collected-from-1-april-2017>

## Targeted Lung Health Checks

Currently, targeted lung health checks (TLHCs) are only available in some parts of England, and they are expected to be available everywhere by 2029. TLHC are available in Barnet now and people are eligible if they are aged between 55 and 74 years and are a current or former smoker. The NCL TLHC programme started in November 2022.

Those who are eligible will receive a letter inviting them for a telephone appointment. Following the telephone appointment, if appropriate they will be booked for an appointment to meet a nurse.

At a lung health check, a nurse will ask about an individual's health and lifestyle to find out about their risk of lung cancer. Depending on the assessment, they may require no further action or be offered a chest CT scan on the same day. The CT scan uses x-rays to check for early signs of lung cancer. Following the outcome of the scan, the individual may be referred to their local hospital for further tests if cancer is suspected or to their GP if there are other findings. Those with a negative scan will be re-invited in two years.

Targeted lung health check CT scans are available at Finchley Memorial Hospital for the Barnet population.

Data on the programme is yet to be publicly available. Recent service level data (up to January 2024) shows that the uptake of the programme across NCL is approximately 43.9%, which is 0.4% below the national average. Uptake continues to improve since the programme commenced. The national uptake target for 2024/25 is 53%. It is not known yet when NHS England will publish data on the programme.

## Inequalities in cancer screening

### **National**

Nationally, there is evidence of inequalities in cancer screening between different population groups. There is evidence that people living in areas of higher deprivation are less likely to complete bowel, cervical and breast screening. People with a cervix from minority ethnic groups are less likely to attend cervical screening, compared with the White British eligible population. People with learning disabilities are less likely to participate in cancer screening, compared with people without learning disabilities.<sup>5</sup> Cancer screening is also lower among adults with severe mental illness, compared with those without.<sup>6</sup> Men have lower uptake of bowel screening, compared with women.

### **Regional**

In North Central London, there was analysis of cancer screening data up to March 2020 for Camden, Islington, and Haringey. For cervical screening, this analysis found low coverage for people with learning disabilities and people living in areas of higher deprivation. Those following Jewish religion or with no faith had the highest cervical screening coverage than those with any other religion. For bowel screening, men had a lower coverage than women, and coverage was low for people with learning disabilities, and residents of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, African backgrounds and without

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nhs-population-screening-inequalities-strategy/phe-screening-inequalities-strategy>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41416-023-02249-3>

recorded ethnicities. Bowel screening coverage was also lower for those living in areas of higher deprivation.<sup>7</sup>

### **Local**

In Barnet, it has not been possible to analyse demographic data for cancer screening from primary care records, due to challenges with primary care data extraction. It is likely however, that patterns of inequalities in cancer screening from national and regional data are applicable to Barnet. From the available data, there are inequalities between age groups for cervical screening in Barnet – people with a cervix aged 25-49 years have a lower uptake compared to those aged 50 – 64 years. There is also variation in cancer screening uptake between Barnet PCNs, as shown in the figures. In 2022/23, PCN2 and then PCN3 had the highest uptake of the three national cancer screening programmes.

### **Cancer screening barriers and challenges**

Barriers to cancer screening can contribute to inequalities in cancer screening coverage. These barriers include stigma about cancer screening, practical barriers such as difficulties booking a screening appointment, or difficulties attending an appointment (for cervical and breast screening) due to other responsibilities or cost. There is evidence that making appointments more flexible, using personalised reminders and re-invitations can help increase screening uptake in underserved populations.<sup>8</sup>

Inequalities in barriers to cancer screening can manifest at points throughout the cancer screening pathway - from identifying eligible people and sending invitations, providing information about screening, and accessing the services, to accessing treatment following the screening if needed.

## Work to increase cancer screening in Barnet

### **North Central London Cancer Awareness, Prevention and Screening (PAS) Strategy and Action Plan**

The North Central London Cancer Prevention, Awareness and Screening (PAS) Strategy 2023-2028 and Action Plan 2023-2025 is in place. The strategy's overall aim is to support the NHS Long Term Plan cancer ambitions – by 2028, diagnosing 75% of cancers at stage 1 and 2, and for each year, 55,000 more people to survive for five years or more following a cancer diagnosis.

For cancer screening, the strategy aims to increase participation in cervical, bowel and breast screening programmes, reduce inequalities in uptake, and adapt screening improvement activities in line with national and regional work to meet local needs. It also includes full roll out of the Targeted Lung Health Checks programme, and supports the creation of greater alignment between identification of people with an increased risk of cancer and surveillance services, and relevant screening programmes.

### **Recent work in Barnet**

In Barnet, a project to improve cancer screening for people with learning disabilities has recently completed. The project was funded by NCL Cancer Alliance, supported by Barnet Public Health, and delivered by Barnet Mencap. The project ran for just over one year and included the following

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<sup>7</sup> North Central London Cancer Screening. Summary report: Inequality analysis before COVID-19. Camden and Islington Public Health Intelligence Team. November 2021.

<sup>8</sup> <https://news.cancerresearchuk.org/2022/09/23/health-inequalities-breaking-down-barriers-to-cancer-screening/>



outcomes: an enhanced easy-read cervical screening resource was designed and is available for download online for use by GP practices for individuals that need the adjustment,<sup>9</sup> a cancer screening guide for family carers and support workers was co-produced and distributed, and train the trainer workshops were delivered to service providers and Learning Disability Partnerships across North Central London, with a total of 38 in attendance.

### **Current and planned work in Barnet**

Within the NCL Cancer PAS Action Plan, there is work to engage with PCNs with low screening uptake to improve patient participation, and promote screening programmes by augmenting national campaigns, utilising community engagement, and incorporating information in the Making Every Contact Count training packages.

The NCL Cancer PAS Action Plan includes focused work with population groups where cancer screening coverage is low and in areas of highest deprivation, including people experiencing homelessness, people with learning disabilities and people with severe mental illness. There are also specific actions for each of the screening programmes – bowel, breast and cervical screening – and the targeted lung health checks programme.

For bowel screening, the age at when people are offered screening is expanding to include people aged 50 - 59 years. In Barnet, people aged 54 years and above are being invited. During 2024/25, those aged 52 and 50 will start receiving invites.

Linked to work being carried out to improve cervical screening coverage, NCL will be supporting NHS England to deliver on the ambition to eliminate cervical cancer by 2040. This work will include improving the uptake of HPV vaccinations in school-aged children, women up to the age of 25 and men who have sex with men, up to the age of 45.

Barnet is also supporting other programmes linked to screening such as BRCA testing for Jewish communities (the programme aims to identify people at high risk of breast cancer and enrol them in screening early).

Targeted lung health checks are now available in Barnet and people are eligible if they are aged between 55 and 74 years and are a current or former smoker. Eligible people will receive an invitation letter, and there is work to raise awareness of this programme in Barnet.

A community engagement project, funded and led by NCL Cancer Alliance and supported by Barnet Public Health, will run throughout 2024. This work involves four community organisations – CB Plus, Groundwork, Centre of Excellence and the Romanian and Eastern European Hub. Each organisation will host cancer awareness events, including awareness of cancer screening programmes, and will tailor messages from national awareness days and campaigns. More detailed demographic data from primary care about cancer screening uptake would enable further tailoring of activities, so this is an area of focus.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.barnetmencap.org.uk/cancerscreeningpack/>