

Accessing sexual health testing online

Background

Sexual Health London (SHL) was developed in London through the London Sexual Health Programme, a partnership of 31 London local authorities, which enables sexual health services (SHSs) to meet the combined challenge of rising demand and fewer resources.

The service makes it simpler and more convenient for people – including those in the groups more at risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) – to get tested regularly, encouraging early identification of STIs and avoiding onward transmission.

What was involved

The SHL service was designed after an engagement exercise took place to hear the views of over 5,000 residents, patients and clinicians about SHSs in London. The engagement exercise explored whether people would be interested to use this type of service, and how it would work in practice with an existing network of clinics. Over half of the people consulted said they would consider using an online SHS if it was available.

Close partnership between SHL and clinics is central to ensuring the service enhances options for Londoners, and at the same time complements the workload of busy clinics. The specification for the service was informed by a Clinical Advisory Group, drawing on feedback, and formed part of procurement for a new London online service.

SHL was launched in January 2018 and has already provided sexual health services to around 200,000 people across London. It is funded by local authorities and enables people to order tests and view results online.

How the service works

If people want to order a testing kit, they can access the service directly through the web or via clinic websites. They then create an online account and answer a few simple triaging questions, similar to those used in clinics. Once this is complete, a kit is sent through the post, usually arriving within a couple of days. The kits are also directly available in many of London's clinics, which means that people can choose to collect and sample at home.

The user then returns the samples through Freepost, and results are typically ready in 1 to 2 days.

If follow-up care is needed, such as safeguarding concerns or for a positive or reactive result, there is a dedicated team of health advisors on-hand to support people to access care. SHL is integrated within the majority of

London's sexual health clinics, giving clinicians access to the patient's online record. This avoids unnecessary testing.

The service also offers a remote chlamydia treatment service for people with uncomplicated chlamydia, including partner notification. People who are clinically eligible for the service are sent medication through the post – or can attend a participating community pharmacy. They can also choose to attend a clinic.

Working well

Over 200,000 Londoners have chosen to use the SHL service since it launched, giving people the option to manage their sexual health online and to access care in this new way.

The service is aimed at people without any symptoms. It has identified over 12,000 infections since it launched and provided 3,700 chlamydia treatments remotely.

Work focusing on people that might be at higher risk of poorer sexual outcomes has also begun to take place – and this included promoting the service at a recent Black Pride event in London.

Feedback from people using the service has been extremely positive, with 98% saying that they would recommend it to friends and family. The service attracts people who are recent users of services, less regular users and those who are new to SHSs.

In 2019, 20% of new online users reported never having used an SHS before. As the feedback confirms, SHL is becoming an increasingly valued service.

Clinics across London have developed new ways of working, to include SHL as an important part of their offer.

Next steps

SHL will continue to be part of the participating councils' long-term commitment to STI prevention. It remains the ambition to better meet the needs of Londoners by further embedding the service across the Capital.

For more information, contact sexualhealth@cityoflondon.gov.uk.