

HIV COVID-19 Network Briefing Five

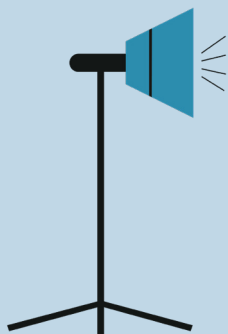


A fortnightly update from the voluntary sector

12 June 2020

1) Spotlight issue this week

Community Testing



Community outreach providers are observing increasing popularity of public sex environments as lockdown rules ease and weather improves. Many are re-establishing their presence in these spaces.

These organisations are doing so in collaboration with their local commissioners, having established a rationale for intervention, conducted a risk assessment and secured personal protective equipment for staff, and developed novel prevention delivery methods compliant with social distancing (such as bespoke condom boxes at relevant sites, or packs handed out on request).

Some providers who work onsite report anxiety and confusion from those using public sex environments around the impact of coronavirus legislation on increased surveillance and policing of these areas. While there is no evidence of this as yet, the risk that it may dissuade people to access services and disparities in how fines pertaining to the Coronavirus Act have been issued across different groups cause concern.

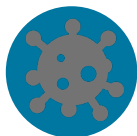
No community testing organisations have resumed face-to-face testing, given concerns about maintaining social distancing during not only testing, but any reactive test. Some have, however, taken advantage of the newly expanded national home sampling service and used Zoom to assist clients in home-sampling promptly and effectively.

NAT is reviewing content in their community testing toolkit, to be published soon. Terrence Higgins Trust is currently working on a position statement with guidance on interventions and health promotion during COVID-19.

2) HIV/STI testing & clinical services

- HIV testing during lockdown has been scaled up this week following the announcement that PHE have opened up the Home Sampling Service to all local authorities in England, making 7000 kits available. This supports the Time to Test campaign launched by 56 Dean Street to utilise the opportunity provided by a temporary lull in sexual activity to diagnose people living with HIV, get them on treatment and prevent onwards transmissions. HPE is leading promotion of the programme to gay and bisexual men and black African groups. However, there are reports of increasing HIV acquisition amongst sex workers and people who inject drugs in some areas. It is vital local authorities use local data and work with the community sector to ensure access to testing for their local key populations.
- In addition to pressures facing community testing organisations during COVID-19 it was recently announced that Royal Mail will be changing their Terms & Conditions around the carriage of biological specimens through Freepost on a 90-day timetable. This has developed in response to COVID-19 concerns but is understood to impact on the costs of public health programmes in HIV and sexual health. PHE have informed stakeholders that they will be working with Royal Mail to establish extended timetables for migration and have sought assurances that no specimens will be destroyed or surcharges imposed during the migration period.





2) HIV/STI testing & clinical services cont.

- The latest BASHH clinical thermometer [survey results](#) indicate severe and growing face to face capacity restrictions across STIs, contraception and HIV service provision. 87% of respondents reported having less than 20% face to face capacity for HIV services compared to 54% in April. It is concerning that capacity is also reducing when remote services are taken into account. While clinical assessment has been offered by phone and video consultation, uptake among service users has been low.

3) Barriers & marginalisation

- The PHE inequalities review published last week has led to significant confusion around next steps from the Government to address the disparities experienced by BAME communities. A lack of recommendations to tackle health inequalities during the pandemic was unexpected, with HIV clinicians and support services in particular in need of urgent guidance and advice that can be provided to anxious clients. A clear commitment from PHE on how it intends to progress with this work, along with a timeframe, is much needed.



- LGBT Foundation's new [report](#) on how LGBT communities are impacted by Covid-19 highlights significant mental health and wellbeing challenges faced; 42% of survey respondents would like to access support for their mental health at this time, rising to 66% of BAME LGBT people; 18% are concerned about substance or alcohol misuse or relapsing during this period; and 8% feel unsafe where they are currently staying.

4) Monitoring sexual behaviours

- A [survey](#) by Terrence Higgins Trust and 56 Dean Street shows that 84% of people in the UK are abstaining from sex outside of their immediate household due to lockdown. Preliminary [results](#) from research on the use of hook-up apps also highlight that the majority of gay and bisexual men have stopped having casual sex and two-thirds of PrEP users have interrupted PrEP during this period. However, it also shows that a quarter have engaged in some casual sex and there are indications this figure will increase over the coming weeks, underlining the need to move quickly to both seize opportunities afforded by lockdown and remove barriers to accessing sexual health services.

GET INVOLVED

- » NAT is keen to make a full assessment of the financial impact of new Royal Mail charges on community health organisations and any knock-on effect on testing uptake, and invite any affected stakeholders to get in touch with natasha.dhumma@nat.org.uk with information.
- » Patients not Passports have launched a new [petition](#) to end the hostile environment in healthcare by scrapping NHS charging for migrants and data sharing with the Home Office.