

HMP Low Newton becomes first female prison in the UK to micro-eliminate hepatitis C

High Intensity Test and Treat (HITT) initiative at HMP Low Newton sees 99.3% of the population tested for hepatitis C

Key points

- HMP Low Newton, a prison for women in north east England, ran a HITT initiative to test the population of 307 in January 2020.
- By collaborating with drug and alcohol treatment services, healthcare, and The Hepatitis C Trust's peers, HMP Low Newton was able to test 99.3% of its population (all but two people).
- HMP Low Newton employed a range of innovative initiatives to encourage residents of the prison to attend, including videos, a countdown, and the incentive of vouchers for everyone if the prison achieved an uptake of 95% or above.

Overview

HMP Low Newton, a prison for women in north east England, micro-eliminated hepatitis C in January 2020, despite the population being a challenging mix of adult, young offenders, remand, sentenced and life-sentenced women with high levels of complex needs. Residents of the prison were encouraged to attend an intensive testing weekend through videos streamed through their TVs; information booklets distributed in the weeks preceding the weekend; tea or coffee after the test; and, significantly, the incentive of a £3 voucher for the resident-run hair and nail bar and other prison-run shops for everyone if the prison was able to reach the test level of 95% or more of its population. HMP Low Newton managed to achieve a staggering uptake rate of 99.3% of its population, of whom 30% were antibody-positive and 8% were RNA-positive.

Background

As an at-risk group for hepatitis C identified by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE), it is crucial that the prison population is targeted for screening, awareness-raising, and treatment in order for the UK to achieve its commitment to the World Health Organization's (WHO) target to eliminate hepatitis C as a major public health threat by

2030.¹ In 2017/18, over one in 10 people (11%) in the English prison estate tested positive for hepatitis C antibodies, but less than half (46%) of these people received follow-up testing to confirm whether they had an active infection and required treatment. Even those who did have an RNA test and were found to be positive for hepatitis C RNA were unlikely to get treated: only 40% received specialist referrals for their infection.²

As well as avoiding the significant health harms that result from chronic hepatitis C, such as fatal cirrhosis and liver cancer, interventions aimed at testing and treating the virus in prisons can have wider benefits, including addressing associated health problems, improving mental health, and contributing to rehabilitation. This makes it particularly important to test and treat this population, beyond the reduction in onwards transmission that clearing the virus will contribute to.

Why HMP Low Newton decided to eliminate hepatitis C

HMP Low Newton had been delivering the opt-out blood-borne virus testing policy since it was introduced nationally in 2018, with almost all women coming into the prison accepting the test. Although this uptake is much higher than the national average of around a quarter of people accepting testing,³ many women had been in the prison for a number of years and either had not been tested in the first place or were at risk of having been re-infected.

Andrew Marr, Head of Primrose and PIPE at HMP Low Newton attended a multi-agency meeting of north east prisons in November 2019 which alerted him to the high prevalence of hepatitis C within the general prison estate and encouraged him to take a proactive approach to tackling the virus in HMP Low Newton. The meeting highlighted the potential for prisons to micro-eliminate hepatitis C in their estate and used a Cepheid machine to demonstrate the ease of testing.

What initiatives led to the elimination of hepatitis C in HMP Low Newton

¹ NICE. (2012). *Hepatitis B and C testing: people at risk of infection*. Accessed April 2019. Available at: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph43/resources/hepatitis-b-and-c-testing-people-at-risk-of-infection-pdf-1996356260293>

² Public Health England. (2019). *Hepatitis C in England 2019: Working to eliminate hepatitis C as a major public health threat*. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/855064/HCV_in_England_2019.pdf

³ Public Health England. (2019). *Hepatitis C in England 2019: Working to eliminate hepatitis C as a major public health threat*. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/855064/HCV_in_England_2019.pdf

Local planning meetings to establish what would be needed to test the entire HMP Low Newton population brought together nurses, staff working in drug and alcohol treatment teams, and The Hepatitis C Trust's peers, among others. It was decided that an intensive weekend to test the entire population was the best way forward, known as 'HITT' (High Intensity Test and Treat), with efforts to myth-bust and raise awareness in the weeks leading up to this.

Awareness-raising initiatives included:

- A video streamed to residents' TVs from the month preceding the HITT which featured Andrew Marr (Head of Primrose & PIPE), The Hepatitis C Trust peer mentors, healthcare staff, and residents from within the prison talking about hepatitis C and the importance of getting tested and treated;
- Myth-busting leaflets distributed under the residents' doors in the weeks leading up to the HITT;
- A countdown running along the bottom of the TVs to keep a buzz around the event.

The testing weekend itself occurred at the end of January 2020 and ran from 9am until 4pm on both days. Packs with all residents' names on were laid out near the entrance and included information about testing and items such as stress balls and wristbands. Having named packs meant that it was easy to see who had not attended the testing at the end of each session and if someone had not come along peers went to their rooms to persuade them to get tested.

After collecting their pack, people went into booths to talk to a member of the drug and alcohol team and a peer, who encouraged them to get tested and explained the process. Following this, they had blood taken by the nurses and a further opportunity to hear about harm reduction behaviours from healthcare staff on the way out beside a tea and coffee stand.

Incentives were key to the success of the HITT.

As well as the items enclosed in their packs and the offer of tea / coffee after the test, residents were told in the weeks before that if the prison achieved an uptake rate of 95% or



The Hepatitis C Trust prison peer team outside HMP Low Newton before the HITT.

higher, everyone in the prison would get a £3 voucher to spend in the resident-run nail and hair bar and other prison run shops. This was fantastic for encouraging people to get others along and created a sense of shared achievement and pride in the event.

Afterwards, another video was sent out to the TVs from Andrew Marr thanking everyone for taking part and outlining next steps and plans for the future.

Outcomes

Of the 307 women in HMP Low Newton, 99.3% were tested over the course of the weekend, with only two people refusing to be tested. Just under a third (30%) of people tested positive for hepatitis C antibodies, and of these 25% were found to be RNA-positive and so required treatment. Significantly, around 15 people who had tested negative when they had first arrived at the prison were found to be positive at the testing weekend. This flagged a re-infection rate and meant plans could be put in place to prevent this in the future.

Future plans and maintaining elimination

HMP Low Newton hopes to continue its high uptake of blood-borne virus testing for new admissions. It also has plans to create another video with Andrew Marr and peers focussed on how people can minimise their risk of re-infection and promote safer injecting behaviours. The Hepatitis C Trust peers will continue to work with both healthcare and drug and alcohol treatment teams to ensure people who have been flagged as at risk of re-infection are tested and treated.

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