

Women's Health Plan: Interim Progress Update 2023

August 2023

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Introduction

The [Women's Health Plan](#) was published in August 2021 and sets out how the Scottish Government intends to address inequalities in women's health outcomes. Running over a three year period from 2021 – 2024, its sixty-six actions focus on six priority areas which are i) menopause, ii) menstrual health, iii) endometriosis, iv) abortion and contraception, v) post-natal contraception and vi) heart health.

The first [Report on Progress](#) provided a comprehensive update on the progress made since the publication of the Women's Health Plan from August 2021 until January 2023. This interim report provides a short update on some key highlights that have taken place in the subsequent months.

Importantly, this report recognises and celebrates the important role and accomplishments of stakeholders across the health sector and beyond who are working toward the Women's Health Plan's ambition that all women and girls enjoy the best possible health, throughout their lives.

Cross-cutting actions

Scotland's Women's Health Champion

- The Women's Health Champion, Professor Anna Glasier OBE, was appointed in January 2023. In the months since her appointment, Professor Glasier has met with stakeholders and partners from across Scotland in order to identify good practice and innovation as well as understand areas of greatest challenge across Women's Health.



- Professor Glasier is publishing quarterly blogs on her progress as Women's Health Champion, the first two of which can be found [here](#). In her second blog, she describes the two particular initiatives she's going to be focussing on in the coming months:

“After five months of meetings, I now have a clearer idea of two particular initiatives that I would like to take forward ... Following discussions with representatives of the Royal College of General Practitioners and the [Scottish Deep End Project](#) we are working on a proposal for a pilot study involving taking a specialist Women's Health Service to a number of Deep End Practices. The service would offer all aspects of sexual and reproductive health care but also use the opportunity to assess risk factors for cardiovascular disease and take action accordingly. This project would need to be done in an affordable and sustainable way such that scaling up across all Deep End practices would be realistic and, to this end, the processes and outcomes would need to be very carefully evaluated.

My second initiative concerns contraception and the prevention of unintended pregnancy. It has been suggested that the rise in abortion rates in young women in Scotland may be due, in part, to young women's lack of confidence in hormonal contraception in favour of other approaches ... The findings from the recent Scottish Government publication on [women's experiences of discrimination and the impact on health](#) and the Young Women's Movement [report](#) on experiences of accessing healthcare echo young women's concerns about hormonal contraception. I'm keen to explore this further with young women, to understand their concerns and think about the ways in which we can support them. “

You can read more in Professor Glasier's [Blog](#).

Women's Health Leads

One of the key medium term actions in the Women's Health Plan is to have a Women's Health Lead in every NHS Board, to drive change, share best practice and innovation.

- There is now a Women's Health Lead in nearly every Board. The Leads meet on a quarterly basis through the 'Women's Health Leads Network', chaired by Professor Glasier.
- The Network brings NHS Boards together to discuss areas of learning and challenge across Scotland and consider where practice can be shared and common issues addressed, highlight progress and achievements, and develop a 'Once for Scotland' approach.
- The Scotland-wide challenges in women accessing longer acting reversible methods of contraception (LARC) have been a particular focus for the network and led to the establishing of the [LARC Short Life Working Group](#).

Women's Health Plan Knowledge Hub and wider resources

- The Women's Health Plan [Knowledge Hub](#) ('KHub'), created for stakeholders involved in the delivery and implementation of the Women's Health Plan, continues to be used to share examples of best practice and facilitate discussions on improvements in women's health, across all sectors.
- Work is ongoing to facilitate the sharing of good practice across networks, including the NHS Women's Health Leads Network and National Menopause Specialists Network where examples of innovative practice across primary and secondary care are regularly shared.

NHS Inform Women's Health Platform

As highlighted in the Report on Progress, the [NHS Inform Women's Health Platform](#) was launched in May 2022, to help improve access to comprehensive and accurate information about women's health. Since the January report, we have continued to develop this valuable resource.

- **Pelvic Health:** We have added new content explaining the [pelvic floor and its function](#), advice on pelvic floor exercises, [urinary continence](#) and [pelvic organ prolapse](#). The content is focussed on prevention alongside advice on care and support for those experiencing symptoms.

Spotlight on: New Pelvic floor Animation

Pelvic floor muscles play an important role in our bodies but for many women where they are and what exactly they do is a bit of a mystery.

We know that life events, like pregnancy and childbirth, can impact pelvic floor muscles and their ability to control bladder and bowel function effectively so it's particularly important for women to understand their anatomy.

A new animation has been developed and aims to empower women by showing where the pelvic floor is in the body, the function of the pelvic floor muscles and why it's important that we exercise them just like any other muscle in our bodies. This short, simple and easy to understand animation will sit alongside content explaining the 'how to' of pelvic floor exercises facilitating a preventative approach to pelvic health and giving clear advice to those who may already be experiencing symptoms.

- **Lipoedema:** A new page has been added on [Lipoedema](#), a long term condition which is significantly more common in women. The page includes information on the symptoms, self-management and treatment options for lipoedema as well as sign posting to organisations like '[Talk Lipoedema](#)' for more help, advice and peer support.
- **Sharing resources:** We have also ensured we make the excellent resources from other key organisations available on NHS Inform. This has included an animation on [Polycystic Ovary Syndrome](#) (PCOS) and short films on [contraception options](#) and [fibroids](#). We also linked with [Ready Steady Baby!](#) to include a [short animation](#) on post-partum contraception.

Lived Experience

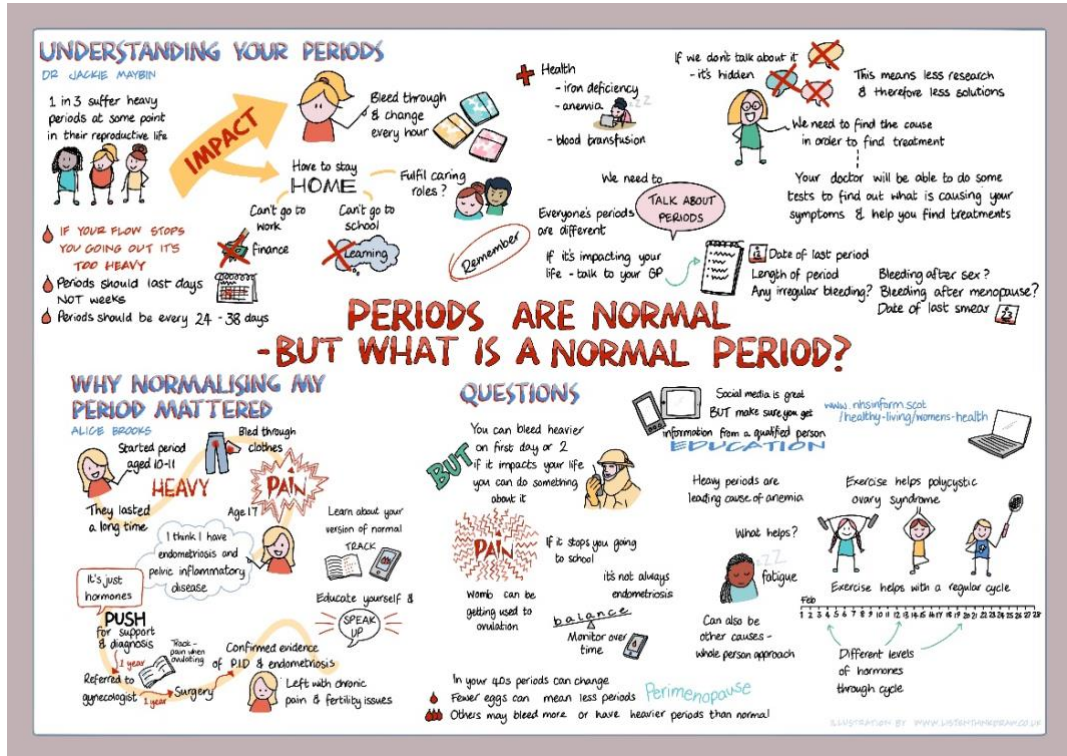
The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE) has continued to support the Plan through their dedicated lived experience programme.

- Following popular engagement on menopause in 2022, a menstrual health workplan is currently being delivered, to ensure that women have access to comprehensive information and resources to support their menstrual health journey and dispel myths and stigma. This has included several webinars exploring [periods](#) and menstrual health related conditions, such as [endometriosis](#) and polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS). A supporting leaflet on menstrual health can be found [here](#). Positive feedback was received by those who attended the menstrual health webinar:

"I learnt more about the subject area, made me feel more confident in understanding my own menstrual health"

"I now feel that I have a wider understanding of when a period is not normal and can educate others on when to seek further advice"

"The lived experience really made me appreciate a different perspective from my own period history and about how we better support people"



- The ALLIANCE has also been working in partnership with organisations, local authorities and community groups to build a series of community sessions for in-person signposting and discussion on women’s health.



- Empowering women with information and encouraging positive attitudes to women’s health experiences remain key priorities. To support this, the ALLIANCE has produced a [toolkit for delivering Conversation Cafes on women’s health](#). The toolkit brings together resources and guidance to set up supportive conversation spaces, facilitate informed discussion with women and build peer support networks.

- The ALLIANCE has continued to ensure that women’s experiences sit alongside the delivery of the Plan, including through the Women’s Health Plan Lived Experience Stakeholder Group. A number of women have also been supported to share their story and raise awareness of their health condition or journeys. For some, this has been through involvement in a series of short online videos highlighting lived experience of menstrual health related conditions such as [fibroids](#).

Contraception, abortion, sexual health and pre-pregnancy

Abortion

The Scottish Government is continuing to focus on the commitments to improve access to abortion care as set out in the Plan.

- We are continuing to support Gillian Mackay MSP with her legislation to introduce safe access zones around premises that provide abortion services, with the consultation analysis and final Bill proposal being [published](#) on 15 June 2023. We are working to ensure the legislation can be considered by the Scottish Parliament as soon as possible.
- The evaluation into the safety and efficacy of Early Medical Abortion at Home (EMAH) was [published](#) on 22 March this year. The evaluation concluded that EMAH is highly effective, and showed no indication of any concerning changes to the low levels of complication seen compared with the arrangements pre-March 2020. Based on this, the previous Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport confirmed that the current arrangements would remain in place, allowing women to continue taking both sets of abortion pills at home when clinically appropriate. The Scottish Government is now taking forward work with NHS Boards to consider how best to take forward the recommendations made in the evaluation to improve EMAH care across Scotland.
- In January 2023, the Scottish Government formally commissioned National Services Division (NSD) (which is part of NHS National Services Scotland) to develop a specification to provide a service for abortions up to 24 weeks gestation to be provided within Scotland, to ensure that women can access all forms of abortion services as locally as possible. In the meantime, and where an NHS Board cannot offer abortion services up to 24 weeks' gestation locally, they must work to provide an appropriate and person-centred care pathway for all patients seeking abortions up to the legal limit.

Contraception

- A Long-Acting Reversible Contraception (LARC) Short Life Working Group, chaired by Professor Anna Glasier, has been established. The group brings together experts from across Scotland to share knowledge and experience and to identify and take forward actions to address the current challenges in access to longer acting methods of contraception. The Group, which meets on a quarterly basis and reports to the Women's Health Plan Implementation Programme Board, has already identified examples of innovative and effective practice across Scotland.

Spotlight: NHS Dumfries and Galloway Supporting 'Seldom Heard' Women

Sexual health practitioners have been supporting work in NHS Dumfries and Galloway to meet the health needs of their 'seldom heard' women. The group supports women from a range of different backgrounds including those experiencing homelessness, mental health issues or who are refugees, as well as those from minority ethnic backgrounds or who are care-experienced.

The group provides women with information on methods of contraception, menstrual health conditions and sexual health screening. Local outreach clinics are also held by a nurse practitioner, including clinics for homeless women in local housing support services, and most recently visiting Ukrainian Refugees in their temporary accommodation to better identify their health needs. To compliment this work, training sessions are delivered to support education and training of primary care colleagues and health practitioners.

Spotlight: NHS Highland Sexual Health Young Person's Service

In response to the pandemic, when many health services could not be provided face to face, the NHS Highland Sexual Health team were keen to ensure that young people in their local area could still access the service and receive the necessary support.

The concept of a 'live chat' was introduced as an innovative way of reaching out to young people during this challenging time and had the added benefit of improving access to sexual health services for the many young people who live in the remote and rural areas across NHS Highland.

Since the introduction of the 'chat' service two years ago, the number of young people using sexual health services has increased by 300%, with 80% of Live Chat users going on to make an appointment. The feedback from the people using the service has been really positive and many have found the service to be both accessible and informative.

Post-Partum Contraception

- The Scottish Postpartum Contraception Network, has been working to make post-partum contraception available to women across Scotland. In March 2023, the Network hosted their 2nd Scottish Postpartum Contraception Conference, supported



- by the Scottish Government. The former Minister for Women’s Health, Ms Maree Todd MSP, and Professor Glasier were key speakers at the event, and had the opportunity to hear first-hand about innovations and examples of best practice.
- A new post-partum contraception animation has been created by NHS Lothian in collaboration with service users and healthcare professionals. Providing information on getting an IUD or coil fitted after having a baby, this [animation](#) provides more information to help women make an informed decision on contraception options after giving birth and sits alongside the [animation on post-partum contraception options](#), which is now on NHS Inform.
- **Training** has been developed to support NHS staff to provide information to women on postpartum contraception and its benefits, as well as practical guidance on postpartum coil insertion. As part of this work, national webinars have been held, giving NHS Scotland staff the opportunity to learn about the clinical aspects of postpartum contraception.
- **Onsite visits** are also being undertaken, where representatives from the network visit NHS Boards to support staff training. Empowering staff to feel confident in their knowledge and practical skills will play a key role in improving access to contraception after childbirth and supporting women to make informed choices around contraception as part of their birth plan.

Menopause and menstrual health, including endometriosis

Menopause

- A Menopause Clinical Reference Group has been established to drive forward the more complex menopause actions within the Women's Health Plan, as well as to share best practice and improvements in menopause care and support.
- Chaired by Dr Heather Currie, this group is focussed on how best to enable women's access to menopause care through both primary and secondary care, looking at the transferability of best practice and a menu of interventions on 'what works'. The group first met in June 2023 and will meet quarterly.

Menopause Innovation Challenge

- On 27 June 2023 CivTech, in partnership with The Scottish Health Industry Partnership (SHIP), part of the Scottish Government Chief Scientist Office (CSO), launched the [Menopause Innovation Challenge](#).
- This challenge aims to look at how technology can empower women to better understand menopause and access the right support for their needs, by helping them to understand and identify the best options for individualised support; understand which self-help measures may be useful and to manage symptoms in the workplace; and to access medical support.

Spotlight on: Menopause Service Innovation NHS Dumfries and Galloway

The Specialist Menopause Service in NHS Dumfries and Galloway now run a virtual 'Menopause Drop-in' session every fortnight to support and provide consistent advice to primary care teams on menopause. These sessions provide a space to answer frequently asked questions on the menopause and share new guidance or best practice examples. The main aim of the sessions is to ensure there is consistency in advice given from primary care and that patients are provided with better menopause care. There are plans to expand these sessions to other aspects of women's health in due course.

To compliment this work, NHS Dumfries and Galloway are looking at ways to improve access to reliable, accurate information for women locally to assist them to make informed choices about their menopause care. This includes hosting local information webinars on the menopause, and looking at ways to introduce discussions on menopause, and signpost to information, during cervical screening appointments with women of menopausal age.

Spotlight on: NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde Menopause Service Developments

Menopause Referral Guidance

The NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde Menopause Referral Guidance was developed by a multidisciplinary group of menopause experts and published in June 2023. It sets out clear criteria for both referral and the expected initial management of menopause and is available on the [Right Decision](#) platform.

Psychiatry Multi-Disciplinary Team Case Conference.

Dr Sinead McAree, a consultant psychiatrist, recognised that along with educational inputs, a Psychiatry Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) would be an excellent platform to improve knowledge and practice of menopause. The first MDT was held in May 2023 and included staff from primary care as well as psychiatry. The MDT outcomes are:

- better understanding of the relationship between menopause and illness.
- differentiating and understanding the relationship between physical and mental causes of symptoms
- improvement in both mental health and physical health symptom control
- increased learning and co-working opportunities for clinicians
- avoidance of an individual sitting on multiple waiting lists for specialist clinics

The Sandyford menopause email advice service

This service was established in 2019 in response to increased referrals and enquiries about menopause. Clinicians email their enquiries about menopause symptoms, treatments and side effects and to check if a referral is appropriate, to a discrete email address. The Sandyford consultant on-call answers the emails as part of the on-call duty and consequently, the majority of emails are responded to within 24 hours.

“I just wanted to comment on the support I have received as a GP from the menopause advice [...] staffed by the CSRH consultants. They provide a genuinely outstanding service - not only in the quality of their responses but also the speed with which they reply. I have rarely waited more than hours for a comprehensive response to my query. At a time where most NHS services are struggling to meet patient/primary care demand it's almost unbelievable a service of this quality exists”.

From a GP, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde

The number of enquiries to the email advice service continues to increase, from under 200 in year 2, to more than 1,000 already in 2023, almost the same as the whole of 2022. This has led better initial menopause management for women and a reduction in inappropriate referrals to the specialist menopause clinic at Sandyford. This has been a valued service development, illustrated by the increased use of the email service, and the frequent replies expressing thanks and appreciation.

NHS Scotland Menopause and Menstrual Health Workplace Policy

- The upcoming NHS Scotland Menopause and Menstrual Health Workplace Policy is in the final stages of policy development and is expected to launch later this year. Throughout this process the policy has been informed by the Menopause and Menstrual Health Working Group, NHSScotland governance forums, and the University of Glasgow's research into NHSScotland staff experiences of menopause and menstrual health in the workplace.
- Alongside the policy, supporting documentation is being developed that can be used by staff and managers to further develop their knowledge and increase the support for those experiencing menopause and menstrual health in the workplace.

Spotlight on: NHS Ayrshire and Arran Workplace guidance

NHS Ayrshire and Arran recognised that over 75% of their workforce are female and of those, 45% are females over the age of 45, therefore identifying an opportunity to better support their staff as they navigate the menopausal transition.

In October 2022, NHS Ayrshire and Arran launched their menopause workplace guidance, to provide line managers with clear guidance on how to support employees through peri-menopause and beyond. It is designed to be inclusive of all gender identities and draws together guidance from the Faculty of Occupational Medicine, the British Menopause Society and the National Institute for Care and Excellence (NICE).

In addition, NHS Ayrshire and Arran host regular menopause awareness sessions for all staff seeking advice on managing the menopause transition in the workplace.

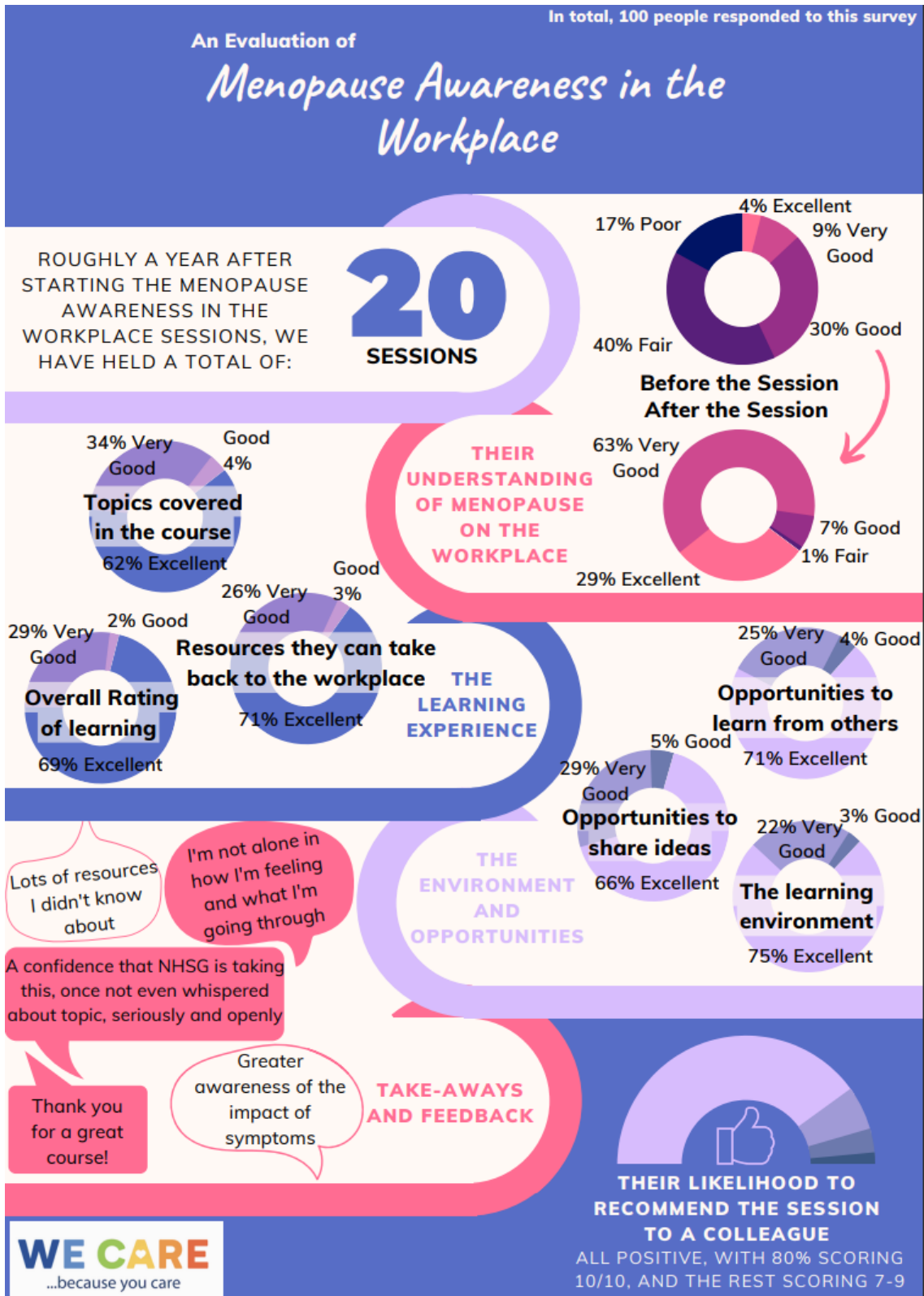
A learn-pro module is also available for line managers enabling them to understand more about the menopause and better support their staff.

A strategic group, the Menopause At Work Group met first in late December 2022 and will continue to drive forward improvements in their approach to the menopause in the workplace.

The aim of this work is to build a culture of awareness and support in all levels of the organisation, ensuring that every staff member has access to the right support and information.

Spotlight on: NHS Grampian workplace support

NHS Grampian have hosted a number of menopause awareness in the workplace sessions for their staff, and through a local survey have created a summary of the evaluation from these sessions which have been well-received.



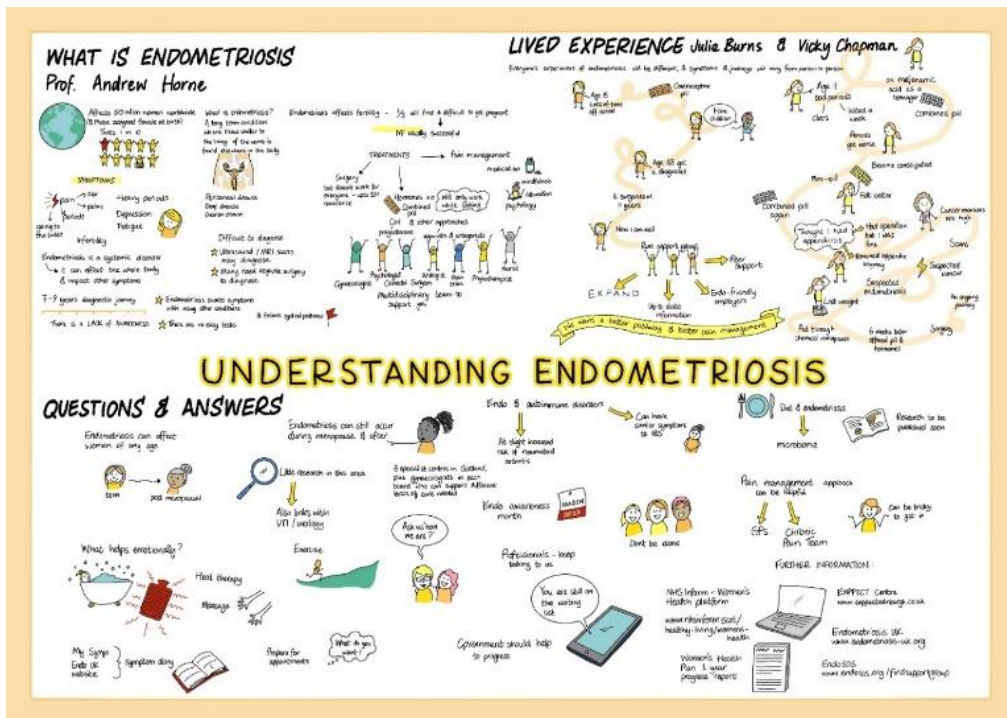
Menstrual health

- Building on the success of the Menopause Specialist Network we have now established an equivalent network for health care professionals focussing on menstrual health.
- The Scottish National Menstrual Health Specialist Network, chaired by Dr Jackie Maybin, will meet quarterly. It will provide a forum for peer support and sharing expert clinical advice, best practice and innovation across NHS Boards to support healthcare services to be responsive and adaptive to the individual needs of women and girls.
- In addition, there is now a Scottish Menstrual Health Clinical Reference Group, a smaller focussed subset, designed to take forward issues and actions raised by the larger Network as well as acting in an advisory capacity, providing clinical expertise when necessary.

Endometriosis

Work continues to be taken forward to improve access to appropriate support, speedy diagnosis and best treatment for Endometriosis. This includes continued engagement with those with lived experience and our lived experience forum to support the delivery of the Women's Health Plan.

- In March 2023, we developed an engagement campaign with Young Scot targeted at young people. The campaign delivered [content](#) which raised awareness of the condition, provided support to those diagnosed and provided guidance to those supporting someone with endometriosis. The campaign also created learning materials in line with the Curriculum for Excellence for use in schools.
- The ALLIANCE, in partnership with the Scottish Government, delivered a virtual [webinar](#) which focussed on raising awareness of endometriosis. The webinar provided information from an expert clinician as well as people with lived experience to provide insight and reflections from their own endometriosis journey.



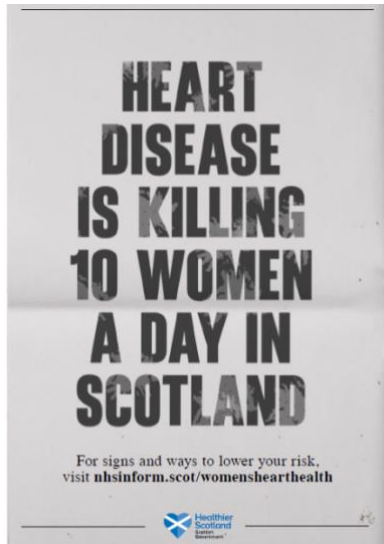
- Endometriosis UK have been granted funding of £24,000 by the Scottish Government to deliver a project which will create new resources to enhance the information available on the support, treatment and management of endometriosis associated pain symptoms.
- In March 2023 we announced the University of Edinburgh as the recipients of the [£250,000 research grant](#) from the Scottish Government and Wellbeing of Women. The researchers at the University of Edinburgh will work with the Universities of Aberdeen and Birmingham to run a clinical trial called EPIC2. The research will investigate whether a drug called dichloroacetate is effective in treating endometriosis associated pain symptoms. The research team hopes this could lead to the first ever non-hormonal, non-invasive treatment for endometriosis.
- The Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health and the Women’s Health Champion had the opportunity to visit the research centre in May 2023 to learn more about the research and the impact it could have on the lives of people with endometriosis.



Heart Health

- The Women's Heart Health Sub-group, established in November 2022, was set up to support the delivery of the actions in the Plan related to heart health. This group brings together clinicians, academics and women with lived experience of heart disease.

- A key piece of work for the group has been the development and delivery of an awareness campaign for heart month in February 2023. Outreach posters highlighting the impact of heart disease on women in Scotland were placed in 1,000 pharmacies and 1,600 organisations (such as GPs and community centres). The posters included a link to the [NHS Inform Women's Heart Health page](#), recently updated.



- Throughout June 2023, the Scottish Obstetrics Cardiology Network has [shared for consultation guidelines and pathways](#) relevant to acute presentations of cardiovascular disease in pregnancy.

Gender and Health

Experiences of discrimination and the impact on health - research findings

- A two-phase research project was carried out to build an evidence base on women's health inequalities in Scotland.
- Dr Laura Tinner at the University of Bristol was recruited through the [Economic and Social Research Council's policy fellowship scheme](#) to carry out research to explore and understand experiences of discrimination among women in Scotland and the impact those experiences have on women's health. An intersectional approach, which is the idea that different aspects of a person's identity (e.g. age, disability, gender, race/ethnicity, social class, etc) overlap to form their unique experience, was used as a theoretical and analytical framework for this study.
- Published on 27 June 2023, the [report](#) examines the current evidence base on women's health inequalities and reports on a two-phase research project. Women in the research described being discriminated against in multiple ways and through cultural, institutional and interpersonal levels. Participants described how discrimination has the potential to impact on their health. The findings in this project contribute to the evidence base on women's health inequalities, discrimination and young women through in-depth exploration of women in Scotland's intersectional experiences.



Equally Safe at Work

- Close the Gap's employer accreditation programme, [Equally Safe At Work](#), continues to be piloted across Public Health Scotland, NHS Ayrshire and Arran, NHS Dumfries and Galloway and Healthcare Improvement Scotland.
- The Equally Safe at Work NHS advisory group meet on a quarterly basis and receive regular updates from Close the Gap on the progress of the programme.

Conclusion

This interim report on the Women's Health Plan highlights key areas of progress that have taken place since the publication of the Report on Progress in January 2023. It shows examples of successful collaborative working, good practice and innovation which demonstrate the enthusiasm and dedication of those working across women's health in Scotland.

We would like to thank the Women's Health Leads and the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland for sharing the case studies and examples of local progress that are highlighted throughout this report.

If you are keen to implement any of the practice examples in your area and would like more information about any of the work highlighted in this report you can email womenshealthplan@gov.scot.

You can stay up to date on the Women's Health Plan via Prof Glasier's quarterly [blogs](#).



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This publication is available at www.gov.scot

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at

The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

ISBN: 978-1-83521-143-4 (web only)

Published by The Scottish Government, August 2023

Produced for The Scottish Government by APS Group Scotland, 21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA
PPDAS1329402 (08/23)

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