



Update from Hertfordshire's Director of Public Health

We improve
Residents' lives

We work with
Integrity

We act
Sustainably

We champion
Equality & Fairness



February 2025

Welcome

Hello everyone,

Welcome to the February edition of my Public Health update.

Thank you to everyone for the positive feedback to [the first edition](#), and welcome to our new subscribers. Please do continue to share this through your professional networks and staff communications channels, to ensure that anyone who wishes to receive it can subscribe.

In the last few weeks, I've really enjoyed getting out and about to meet key partners.

At the end of January, I met the leads from [Watford Football Club](#) and [Stevenage Football Club](#) community foundations. The staff and volunteers of these organisations do so much to improve the health and wellbeing of Hertfordshire residents through initiatives like Golden Memories for people with dementia and Shape Up, a healthy weight programme.

It was a privilege to be at Watford Town Hall for the launch of the Watford Homeless Health Forum. As Lord Darzi states in his [report on the state of the NHS](#): "Homelessness is a health catastrophe." People who are homeless, particularly rough sleepers, experience health that is far worse than the rest of the population and often face considerable barriers in accessing care. Through the partnership that New Hope's chief executive Matt Heasman has put together, there is a real hope of changing this for homeless people living in Watford.

It was also a pleasure to attend the Drugs and Alcohol Symposium at the University of Hertfordshire and hear the latest insights into research, strategy and policy.

February spotlight: HIV Testing Week 2025

[National HIV Testing week](#) runs from 10-16 February, and we're using it as an opportunity to increase HIV testing rates in Hertfordshire by ensuring those most at risk know how and where to test.

The number of new HIV diagnoses in England has risen amongst gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (GBMSM), as well as heterosexual men and women. People of Black African, Black Caribbean or other Black ethnicity are also disproportionately impacted, with new diagnoses rising fastest in these groups.

There are an estimated 4,700 people currently living with undiagnosed HIV in England, and between 2020 and 2022, 46% of new diagnoses in the East of England was a late diagnosis.

People can live with HIV for a long time without symptoms, so it is essential for those most at risk to test regularly to allow early diagnosis and timely treatment, protecting their health and preventing onward transmission.

Testing is quick, free, confidential and easy - anyone in Hertfordshire aged 16+ can [order a free HIV test online](#). Free testing, treatment and support is also available through our local [Sexual Health Service](#).

On the same agenda, I was delighted to hear the recent announcement that Lister, Princess Alexandra and Watford General hospitals are to receive additional funding for opt-out testing, as part of the third wave of a highly successful programme in areas of very high and high HIV diagnosed prevalence.

Opt-out testing means that people who attend emergency departments and have blood taken as part of their routine procedure, have an extra blood sample taken unless they opt out. Anyone with a positive result is seen by the relevant HIV, hepatology, or infectious disease team. Since April 2022, the programme has newly identified over 6,500 cases of HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C, so I'm excited to see the huge impact this could have in Hertfordshire.

Please do [support HIV Testing week](#), your help can make a significant difference to the health and wellbeing of our residents.

Sarah Perman

Director of Public Health, Hertfordshire

Highlights

- Last month we celebrated [Clean Air Night](#), helping to spark a local conversation about the health harms of air pollution from wood burning smoke. Recent evidence shows that wood burning smoke contains fine particle air pollution (PM2.5), which enters the bloodstream when inhaled and can cause heart and lung disease, diabetes, dementia and many other diseases. This is part of a wider [Let's clear the air campaign](#) that highlights the simple actions we can all take to protect ourselves from air pollution.
- The East of England LGA's latest report '[Healthy Homes in the East of England](#)' was presented at an annual Parliamentary Reception at the House of Commons last month. There are examples in the report from Hertfordshire, including the work we have been doing on damp and mould and on the [Hertfordshire Growth Board mission on Healthy and Safe Places for All](#). Chief Executive of Watford Borough Council, Donna Nolan, and I gave a webinar presentation about what we're trying to achieve with the Growth Board mission. The aim is to ensure that Hertfordshire's residents benefit from neighbourhoods that are designed and regenerated with physical health, mental wellbeing, safety and social connectedness at the heart.
- Our [Stop Smoking service](#) has recently launched two new support programmes to bring us a step closer to our ambition of a Smokefree Hertfordshire by 2030. We hope these services will reach a population of smokers who might not otherwise engage with traditional stop smoking support:
 - [Allen Carr's Easyway to Stop Smoking method](#) is an innovative and clinically proven cognitive behavioural therapy intervention with live group seminars. The evidence base supporting the method is compelling and we are excited to trial it in Hertfordshire to see how it can help our residents.
 - [The Smokefree app](#) is a digital service that can be downloaded on any smartphone. It provides a comprehensive, flexible stop smoking service that people can attend at a time that suits them, without the need for a fixed appointment. This could appeal to those with busy lives, such as shift workers, carers and pregnant women, and those who might find the anonymity beneficial, such as people experiencing mental health issues. Again, we are excited to trial this innovative approach in Hertfordshire.

A forward look

- [Safer Sleep Week](#) runs from 10-16 March 2025. This year we are focusing our programme on giving every child the best start in life through promoting smokefree homes and smokefree pregnancies. Exposure to smoking in pregnancy and smoke in the home is a risk factor for stillbirth and sudden infant death (SID). We're pleased to be able to offer free smokefree training and safer sleeping training to frontline professionals that work directly with families, particularly those that visit families in their homes. Professionals can [register for a free one-hour online smokefree training session](#) (available dates 10 and 27 February), those that complete this will then receive a link to access free Lullaby Trust safer sleeping training during 11-16 March 2025.
- We have several campaigns in the pipeline, here's a snapshot of some of those to look out for in the coming months. If you would like to find out more about any of these or get involved with promotion, [please drop us a line](#):
 - February/March: [supporting](#) those affected by **gambling** and their loved ones
 - March: tackling the **stigma around drug and alcohol use** and [signposting to support](#)
 - April: raising awareness of the harmful effects of **vaping amongst young people**
 - May: supporting working age adults to be more active (**It's never too late to be active**)

Opportunities

- As part of our Making Every Adult Matter programme in Hertfordshire, we are running bitesize training sessions for anyone working with people who are homeless with multiple disadvantages. The [first session takes place on 25 February 2025 from 2pm-4pm](#). It will provide an overview of legal duties around homelessness approaches and applications, and how the sector supports individuals affected by this.
- In partnership with our district and borough councils, we're delivering free training sessions to address a range of environmental health and housing issues. This includes the increased spotlight on damp and mould in the county, what we're doing

to address it, how to assess risk, referral pathways and roles and responsibilities.

Sign up to one of three sessions: [18 February](#), [4 March](#) or [18 March](#).

- I'm pleased to share information on behalf of our ICB colleagues about a free Living Well training programme for VCFSE sector workers in Hertfordshire and West Essex. The course has been designed by certified lifestyle medicine doctors, and helps people improve their health and reduce risk of problems such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease and mental health issues. It consists of four interactive online sessions plus an in-person training day in April. They hope the training will equip you to plan and deliver your own courses for the organisation that you work for. [Watch this short video](#) to learn more about the course and [reserve your place](#).

And finally...

A couple of important health protection updates this month:

Flu

NHS services in Hertfordshire remain under considerable pressure, with winter viruses continuing to spread fast. All parts of the health and care sector are working together to ensure people are seen and treated as quickly as possible, but pressures on services remain significant. At the peak of flu circulating in January, around 5,000 people were seriously ill in hospital in England because they had the virus. It's not too late to get a flu vaccination and I would encourage people to have theirs as soon as possible. We know that having the flu jab can lower the risk of catching flu and can help people have milder symptoms. Most [pharmacies that are part of the flu vaccination programme](#) and GP practices will have some flu vaccine left in stock. Those aged 75 to 79, or who are pregnant, can also have the [RSV](#) vaccination to protect from another serious respiratory illness.

Bird flu

We're also seeing a rise in cases of bird (avian) flu across the UK, in both kept and wild birds. Bird flu is an infectious type of influenza that spreads among birds, but there is also potential for it to cause disease in humans. This week, UKHSA confirmed a case of avian flu in a person in the West Midlands. This is rare and the risk to humans remains low, however we are advising the public not to touch or handle wild birds. The latest government updates are available at: [Bird flu \(avian influenza\): latest situation in England - GOV.UK](#). Information for the public is available at: [Hertfordshire County Council | Bird flu outbreaks](#) and a poster can be [downloaded here](#).

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Useful links

[Further information about our services](#)

[Our research, evidence and intelligence publications](#)

[Children and young people's mental health system newsletter - January 2025](#)

[Suicide prevention network newsletter – February 2025](#)

[Public Health Strategy 2022-2027](#)

[Public Health Business Plan 2024-2027](#)