

Raising Awareness of Women's Cancer Screening



From our stand in General Gordon Square on Women's Day (8th March) we focused on promoting women's health screening. Using freebies of toiletries and sanitary products to attract women to our stall, our staff and volunteers took the opportunity to strike up informal conversations. During these informal conversations, we:

- **highlighted the importance of breast and cervical screening,**
- **encouraged women to attend screening appointments,**
- **reassured those who were nervous, and**
- **gave out leaflets.**

In addition, we gathered **women's perspectives and experience of breast and cervical screening.**

During our short time, we had informal conversations with **34 women**, and gave leaflets to more than 60. Most of the women we spoke to (25) were from **Black or ethnic minority backgrounds**. More than half were **aged between 19 – 34.**

Awareness and Information Accessibility:

Recently migrated women, (such as those with refugee status), lacked awareness about the importance of breast and cervical screenings. These women expressed surprise that they would be offered routine screening appointments for free. Some worried that they were not eligible for screening because of their immigration status – or that they would have to pay for it.

“...never had one in my life [in my country], I didn't know I could get tested, I moved to the UK recently and I didn't know I could get a test about that.”



Trust in Healthcare Providers and Systems:

Positive experiences with GPs and hospitals and efficient services (like phone calls from GP practice to 'remind' women to attend for their appointment) motivate women to attend screening appointment. Conversely, negative experiences, such as difficulties in accessing healthcare professionals for other conditions, or poor communication, erode trust and deter women from booking or attending screening appointments.

“Very happy with my GP (Gallions Reach) they do update me about screening appointments, I've been to Memorial Hospital for breast screening and they were very nice, same as my GP, I trust them.”

“Excellent service in Thamesmead, both for breast screening and cervical screening, I got the letter from the NHS last time in November 2023, very good manners from the nurses and the reception and I am happy to go again, I feel safe and welcome.”

“Very happy with my cervical screening at Vanbrough Hill, I get the letter, I go there, and the nurse makes me feel comfortable.”



Negative experiences with non-screening related health care discouraged some women from booking screening appointments.

“I lost my trust in the NHS completely, I haven’t been able to see a GP since COVID, Triveni is my surgery, and even if I get a [screening] letter no one knows when I will get to see a doctor.”

“Very difficult to access breast screening and cervical screening, very tired of all the remote services, lost trust in NHS, I haven’t seen a consultant in two years, I wish I could afford private health services.”

Importance of Family

For some women, their children are the motivating factor.

‘I did last year, I never miss mine. I get the letter. I go to my GP. I get it done, I never miss an opportunity to get tested, I have children I need to be well to care for them.’

Fear and Pain Perception:

Several women shared fears about the discomfort associated with screening. Fear of discomfort and pain is often fuelled by anecdotal accounts from friends or family. This acts as a significant barrier to booking or attending for screening appointments.

“I am scared about breast screening because other women told me it hurts and is not a pleasant experience, I also avoid cervical screening because my husband’s nan told him that they use a huge instrument and it is not easy and I don’t want to experience that...”

Inclusivity and Body Image Concerns:

Women living with mobility disabilities face additional barriers trying to attend screening appointments such as being expected to stand for mammograms.

healthwatch Greenwich

“...for wheelchair users, we can’t have breast screening because we can’t stand. What other measures are in place for people like us, I can’t even access gym services, they always promise things, but nothing is done...”



Women struggling with body image are reluctant to attend screening appointments in case they will be judged.

“No never had a screening, I know I can book an appointment, but I feel that I am going to be criticised about my body, that I will be judged and I don't feel comfortable booking an appointment...I think they will think I am fat... It would help if more ads included women with different body types, more diverse body types including my own.”

Summary

Using a combination of strategies in a community setting, including face-to-face interaction (short, informal conversations), incentives (freebies), and information resources (leaflets), Healthwatch Greenwich promoted, encouraged, and reassured women about breast and cervical screening.

Among the women we spoke to, awareness gaps were evident, particularly among recently migrated women. For others, trust in healthcare providers and systems is a key driver, with positive experiences encouraging future attendance. In addition, their children were a motivating factor for some. Negative experiences with GPs and hospitals (even when unrelated to screening) reduced the likelihood of women attending screening appointments. Some expressed fear of discomfort or pain, reducing motivation to take up screening opportunities, and women with mobility challenges faced physical barriers in accessing screening.