

North Central London Fertility Policy – implementation update

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Background

Following the merger of five CCGs (Barnet, Enfield, Camden, Haringey and Islington) to form North Central London Integrated Care Board (NCL ICB), a significant programme of work has been undertaken to develop a single fertility policy for NCL.

The JHOSC was updated about this work in September 2021 and November 2021 and the final policy was approved on 19th May 2022 by NCL Strategy & Commissioning Committee (SCC). The final policy and its implementation plan were presented to the JHOSC on 15th July 2022 and the NCL Fertility Policy was operational from 25th July 2022.

The new policy has demonstrated many benefits including:

- Providing for a single, consistent policy across the NCL area
- Providing greater alignment with NICE guidance compared to the legacy policies
- Increased provision of specialist fertility treatments for NCL residents
- Consistency for residents, primary care clinicians, secondary care clinicians and specialist fertility providers on the eligibility, provision and funding of specialist fertility treatments in NCL
- Better patient experience as a result of having equitable and consistent access to specialist fertility treatments.

Implementation

The new NCL policy was launched on 25th July 2022 and a comprehensive implementation and communication plan was followed, to support residents and clinicians in understanding the changes and how it would affect them. Communications about the new policy were distributed via a number of platforms including:

- NCL ICB's public facing website¹
- NCL ICB's GP website²
- NCL ICB's social media
- A podcast (released in different languages)³
- A refresher GP training webinar run jointly by our clinical lead and a specialist fertility clinician from UCLH one year on from the policy release⁴.

Throughout this process, the team have also been utilising a fertility mailbox where we receive queries from both patients and clinicians. This has helped to inform our FAQs and identify trends/issues around implementation that have been addressed as a result of these queries.

Additional benefits

Further to the successful implementation of the NCL Fertility Policy, there have been a number of additional benefits including:

¹ <https://nclhealthandcare.org.uk/keeping-well/fertility-services/>

² <https://gps.northcentrallondon.icb.nhs.uk/services/fertility-services-1>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4NueOCh07c>

⁴ <https://gps.northcentrallondon.icb.nhs.uk/video/fertility-pathway-webinar>

- After working closely with Fertility Network UK, they released a publication praising NCL ICB's work⁵ to address fertility inequality and have noted that they use NCL ICB's policy and policy development approach as an example of best practice.
- As an example of the above, North East London Integrated Care Board contacted NCL ICB when they began a similar piece of work to create a single policy for 5 boroughs and adopted their methodology utilising the NCL approach.
- Penny Mitchell (Director of Population Health Commissioning), who led the development of the NCL Fertility Policy, was invited to speak a Progress Educational Trust event on state-funded fertility treatment to explain the work that was undertaken to develop the new policy, including our significant communications and engagement approach, and to discuss the considerations that ICBs have to take into account when developing fertility policies.
- NCL ICB now has significantly improved relationships with the assisted reproductive clinical teams at the majority of providers across London. This two-way communication route has proved incredibly helpful for resolving issues or queries around patient care, enabling the team to work in partnership providers to ensure the patient pathway is as effective and efficient as possible.
- We have seen a reduction in fertility-related Individual Funding Requests (IFRs) which points to the policy inclusion/exclusion criteria being clearer, for both residents and GPs, as well as the fertility mailbox being an avenue for clinicians to query patient cases before considering next steps such as an IFR.

We note that one of the providers, Homerton, experienced some significant operational issues in 2022/23, exacerbating delays that some patients were experiencing. We responded quickly to queries raised with us and supported residents in understanding their options as to next steps. The ICB's Quality Team worked with North East London ICB and the Homerton to monitor the situation and be assured that the necessary actions (such as mutual aid being offered by two other providers) being completed to resolve the situation.

Data

As was documented and reported during the development of the NCL Fertility Policy, we have limited access to data to support detailed analysis of fertility activity. Alongside the implementation of the NCL Fertility Policy, changes were made that allowed residents to attend any NHS-commissioned provider, in line with NHS guidance on patient choice. Furthermore, we are aware of the backlogs and delays in treatment that many residents experienced due to Covid. It is therefore currently difficult to utilise the data to determine the full impact of the implementation of the NCL Fertility Policy.

The ICB will work with providers to identify a process and methodology that will best support the need for the system to work together to understand activity levels and the impact of the changes made.

⁵ <https://fertilitynetworkuk.org/new-improved-fertility-policy-for-north-central-london-from-25-july/>

Next steps

Eighteen months on since the implementation of the NCL Fertility Policy, it now forms part of the ICB's business as usual portfolio. The fertility team continue to support the smooth operation of the policy including:

- Monitoring of the fertility mailbox: we receive a number of queries per week from both patients and clinicians around the policy. The team responds to these queries (including complaints and Freedom of Information requests(Fols)) and keeps note of any arising themes. If there are queries and/or complaints that are being flagged multiple times, the team looks at ways to address these issues.
- Monitoring of national guidance: in particular, the Women's Health Strategy⁶. This is a 10-year government strategy that sets out a range of commitments to improve the health of women in England. The ICB is continually monitoring specific national guidance around this and participating in national and regional forums to discuss implementation of the strategy.
- Monitoring of changes in the fertility landscape: the ICB is aware that the landscape of fertility treatment is constantly in flux and for that reason, the team actively monitors news to pre-empt any queries and ensure that the policy and FAQs are relevant and up-to-date.

Conclusion

The NCL Fertility Policy has been successfully implemented, delivering increased and equitable access to specialist fertility treatments for our residents. We are grateful to the many members of the public, clinicians and other stakeholders who have participated in this work.

The NCL Fertility Policy will now be managed as per other commissioning policies as part of the standard operating model of the ICB, and the focused programme of work that was established to support the development of the policy has been closed down, and thereby the NCL Fertility Policy is excluded from further scrutiny requirements.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/womens-health-strategy-for-england/womens-health-strategy-for-england>