



## NHS Breast Screening Programme Incident

### Actions

1. GPs should note the announcement by the Secretary of State for Health on Wednesday 2 May and read the attached letters
2. Practice staff should be ready to signpost affected women to available helplines and written materials highlighted through this alert.

**Action by recipients:  
NHS England Regional  
offices**

**Action category:** Important information for immediate action

**Title:** NHS Breast Screening Programme Incident. National screening offer to women aged 70-79 years on 01/04/2018 who have missed a final screen

**Broadcast content:** Following an investigation started in January 2018, Public Health England (PHE) and NHS England (NHSE) identified that in some instances women were not being invited for their final breast screen between their 68<sup>th</sup> and 71<sup>st</sup> birthday. Data have been analysed back to 2009 and an estimated 206,000 women on a GP register in England, now aged 70—79 years, will receive a letter. Those aged up to 72 will be sent a catch up screening invitation. Women aged 72 and above will be offered the opportunity for a screen. Routine breast screening will be unaffected and most women in these age groups will still have received their final screen.

An announcement was made by the Secretary of State for Health on Wednesday 2 May and the Medical Director of PHE has written directly to screening services to inform them of the issue. NHSE have also informed services. The problems, which relate to IT issues and variation in local invitation specification systems, are now resolved.

As part of this Patient Notification Exercise all of the affected women registered with a GP will receive a letter with clear advice and signposting. Although a helpline has been established on 0800 169 2692 women may still attend primary care for advice and support. Some may request further clinical review of their case, particularly if cancer has been detected. Please see the attached letter to professionals for further details of the incident, the advice to women and links to web based material to support GPs and other primary care staff to manage patient needs. The copy of the letter being sent directly to women up to the age of 72 is attached for your information and the second letter will be made available once it has been sent to the women affected.

**Attachments:**

- Letter to professionals
- Patient letter 1 (up to 72 yrs at 01/04/2018)
- NHSE letter to GPs



Dear colleague

## **NHS Breast Screening Programme: National Patient Notification Exercise**

Public Health England (PHE) and NHS England (NHSE) have become aware of an issue with the NHS Breast Screening Programme, which has led to some women not being invited for their final screen between their 68<sup>th</sup> and 71<sup>st</sup> birthday. This is now resolved, and NHSE, PHE and the Department of Health and Social Care have taken the decision together to offer a re-screen to women who have been affected. As part of this Patient Notification Exercise all of the affected women registered with a GP will receive a letter with clear advice and signposting.

This letter explains the issue, how it is being managed, and the arrangements for the Patient Notification Exercise.

### **What has happened?**

Following an investigation started in January 2018, PHE identified that in some instances women less than 71 years who were eligible for a screen were not being invited. A number of complex issues led to this, including with an IT algorithm for the Age Extension trial which incorrectly randomised women into the control arm of the trial before they reached their 71<sup>st</sup> birthday, and variations in the way local services used the IT system to specify which women were invited for screening

### **What has PHE done to mitigate these risks?**

PHE has carried out a thorough investigation of the whole system and a detailed analysis of the data since 2009. This is when the roll out of the current offer for a screen to women 50-70 years of age was completed across England in all breast screening services for all women.

A number of IT improvements and changes to processes have now been made to the screening invitation system and the issue has now been fixed.

PHE, NHS England and NHS Breast Screening Services have also worked closely together to implement and assure manual failsafe systems to complement the IT fixes, and additional guidance has been issued to screening services.

## How is PHE managing the Patient Notification Exercise?

- PHE with the support of NHS Digital is writing to all women who have been affected by this incident. All women registered with a GP will receive a letter by the end of May outlining how they can access the helpline and take up the screening offer if they wish. More than 206,000 women will receive a letter telling them about the issues.
- The letter will tell women who had not reached their 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday by 1/4/2018 that they will be sent a catch-up invitation for a screen by their Breast Screening Service. Women who were between 72 and 79 years on 1/4/2018 will be given information and offered the chance to make a self-referral via the dedicated helpline.
- All women affected who would like to take up the invitation for a screen will be offered an appointment by the end of October 2018.
- PHE is putting in place a helpline for women who want further information and for women who have cancer.
- **The Helpline telephone number is 0800 169 2692**
- NHS Choices will have specific information for women affected by this incident. Information, including on the potential benefits and harms of breast screening for women in this age group, is available to support their choice of whether or not to take up the offer of a re-screen. A patient leaflet is also available.
- Women who have or have had breast cancer and are concerned about how this incident affects them, and families of those who have died of breast cancer, will be able to access specialist clinical support provided by breast cancer charities, Macmillan and Breast Cancer Care, with whom we are working very closely.
- If they want to find out whether there may have been any harm done to them personally, women who were not invited for their final screen, and have or have had breast cancer, and the families of women affected who have died of breast cancer will be offered an individualised specialist assessment. This will consider whether or not the missed invitation could have altered when their cancer was diagnosed and whether, if it had been diagnosed earlier, this could have affected their treatment or prognosis.
- This assessment will inform NHS Duty of Candour conversations to apologise to any women who have been harmed by missing their final screen. This assessment will be offered through a dedicated service provided by specialist clinicians, and can be accessed via the **Helpline on 0800 169 2692**.
- Any women in the Age Extension trial who have been affected will be included in the Patient Notification Exercise.

We are doing all we can to handle this complex situation with sensitivity, to avoid unnecessary alarm to women, to offer the opportunity for re-screening, and to

apologise, both for the failure to invite women as they expected, and, as necessary, for any harm that has been caused as a result.

We have also been mindful of the need to effectively maintain routine healthcare throughout NHS services. The breast screening service in England remains a world leading service and we are grateful for the recent, urgent support that breast screening services have provided to serve women affected by these issues well.

We would ask for your support for the women who may approach you for advice.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Paul Cosford", with a horizontal line underneath.

Professor Paul Cosford CB

Director for Health Protection & Medical Director

[paul.cosford@phe.gov.uk](mailto:paul.cosford@phe.gov.uk)



FORENAME SURNAME

<Address line 1>

<Address line 2>

<Address line 3>

<Address line 4>

<Address line 5>

2nd May 2018

**Reference:** BSC Code/NHS No

Dear Forename Surname

We are writing to you because we recently discovered that we did not invite you to the breast screening appointment that you should have had between your 68th and 71st birthdays.

The NHS Breast Screening Programme invites all women aged 50 to 70 for breast screening every 3 years. Because of a technical problem, we did not send your final invitation at the right time. We are incredibly sorry about this and any concern it may cause.

You will be invited for a catch-up breast screen and do not need to do anything now. Invitations to women who are registered with a GP practice in England will be sent week commencing 14 May and will continue over the following weeks. All women affected who wish to have a breast screen will receive an appointment to take place before the end of October 2018.

If you have changed address or GP then please call our free helpline on: **0800 169 2692**

We have enclosed a leaflet about breast screening. It contains information to help you decide if you want to attend for screening or not.

**If you have been diagnosed with breast cancer at any time since you were 71 years old:**

We understand that finding out we did not send your invitation for screening at the right time might be upsetting. You may have questions about what this means for you.

Our experts say that in many cases missing a single breast screen at around 70 years of age is unlikely to make a significant difference to the course of a woman's breast cancer diagnosis and treatment. However, we understand the importance of looking at your individual case to see if it has affected you. If you would like to discuss this with a nurse, please ring our free helpline on **0800 169 2692**. Please tell the helpline operator you have breast cancer and they will be able to support you.

There is also information on the NHS Choices website at  
<https://www.nhs.uk/pages/home.aspx>.

At the end of this letter there is more about what went wrong and what Public Health England and NHS Breast Screening Services are doing to fix it.

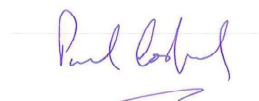
Public Health England and NHS England has also sent this letter to your GP so that they know what is going on and can help support and advise you.

So we can give you the best advice, it would be helpful to have this letter with you if you call the helpline. The person who answers will ask you for the number at the top of the letter. The following information is also helpful:

- the reference number at the top of this letter
- your date of birth
- your address
- the name and address of your GP
- if you are under the care of a breast cancer team, their name or location

**Again, the free helpline number for any questions about this letter is: 0800 169 2692**

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'Paul Cosford', with a horizontal line underneath.

Professor Paul Cosford CB

Director for Health Protection & Medical Director

### **What went wrong?**

Following upgrading the NHS Breast Screening computerised invitation system, Public Health England found some technical issues with the software. These led to variations in how local breast screening services send out their invitations. This meant we didn't send your final breast screening invitation to you.

### **What have we done to fix things?**

Public Health England has now checked through the whole system, including looking through the data back to 2009. We have carried out urgent work on the IT software. We have also introduced an extra failsafe (safety) system to make sure this problem doesn't happen again in the future.

Operations and Information Directorate  
Quarry House  
Quarry Hill  
Leeds  
LS2 7UE

2 May 2018

To: General Practice, England

**Publications Gateway Reference 08021**

Dear Colleague,

**Re: National Breast Screening Incident**

You will have received correspondence from Public Health England (PHE) about an issue with the NHS Breast Screening Programme, which has led to some women who were due to be invited for mammography between their 68<sup>th</sup> and 71<sup>st</sup> birthday, missing their final invitation. PHE has provided detail on the issue, how it is being managed, and the arrangements for PHE's Patient Notification Exercise (PNE). This information should help you if you receive queries from your patients.

PHE will write to all women that have been affected by this issue to let them know where they can go for advice and support. Letters will begin to go to affected women from 3 May. The letter will explain what has happened and what they can now expect with clear advice on how they can take up the offer of a screen if they choose and how to get further advice and support. Copies of PHE's two patient letters been sent to you along with professional advice. PHE has put in place a helpline for women who have been advised by letter that they are affected and want further advice. They also have support from Breast Cancer Care and Macmillan helplines to take calls from women who have been affected and have cancer. NHS Choices has specific information for women affected by this incident and 111 will also hold core information.

Any of your patients who have been affected by this incident will receive a letter by the end of May. Invitations for screening will be sent to women week commencing 14 May and will continue over the following weeks.

- Those who are aged under 72 will automatically receive an invite for a catch up screen.

- Patients aged between 72 and 79 will also be sent information on how they can request a screening appointment through the national helpline.
- All women affected who wish to have a breast screen will receive an appointment before the end of October 2018.
- Women who have not received a letter by the end of May can be reassured they have not been affected by the incident.
- Patients can continue to opt into further screening beyond their 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday. To do this they should make arrangements to opt into continued screening through the practice using usual processes.

PHE is working with clinicians to provide a risk assessment based on published criteria for each affected woman who has had a diagnosis of breast cancer after the age of 71 years. Expert advice is that missing a single breast screen at around 70 years of age is unlikely to have made a significant difference to a woman's breast cancer and how it is treated. However, some patients who have received a letter informing them about the incident may have developed breast cancer and will be concerned their prognosis has been affected by the screening incident. This risk assessment will consider whether or not the missed invitation could have altered when their cancer was diagnosed and whether, if it was diagnosed earlier, this could have affected their treatment or prognosis. If women request a risk assessment, the findings will be sent to their breast screening service. PHE will ask women how they want the findings fed back to them personally.

Thank you sincerely for your support in responding to this incident. We appreciate the pressure this may place on your service and staff and would like to thank you in advance for the efforts you will make to support women who have been affected. If you have any specific questions please contact your local Screening QA Service and Screening and Immunisation Team.

Yours sincerely



Dr David Geddes  
Director of Primary Care Commissioning  
NHS England