

Cervical Screening Support Toolkit

Supporting People with
Learning Difficulties (LD)



Introduction

Cervical cancer is largely preventable through regular screening, yet women and people with a cervix who have learning difficulties (LD) are significantly less likely to attend cervical screening. This increases their risk of late diagnosis and poorer outcomes.

As a care provider, you play a vital role in supporting access to screening. This toolkit is designed to give you the knowledge, confidence, and practical tools to help reduce barriers and make reasonable adjustments.

1. Understanding the Issue

- **Eligibility:** Cervical screening is offered to women and people with a cervix aged 25–64.
- **Risk:** Lower uptake among people with LD leads to higher cancer risk.
- **Barriers:** Anxiety, difficulty understanding information, communication challenges, and misconceptions about eligibility all contribute to reduced attendance.

Key Message: Screening should always be considered unless a clinician confirms the individual is not eligible (e.g., following hysterectomy involving removal of the cervix).

2. The Role of Care Providers

Care providers are often the bridge between the individual and healthcare services. You can:

- Encourage engagement with screening programmes.
- Advocate for reasonable adjustments.
- Provide trusted reassurance and continuity.
- Help ensure the person makes an informed choice.

3. Practical Adjustments in Action

a) Before the Appointment

- Offer **easy-read leaflets**, picture guides, or video resources.
- Talk through what screening is, why it matters, and what will happen.
- Check whether the person would like someone to accompany them.
- Book a **longer appointment** to give time for explanations and reassurance.
- Where possible, arrange a **pre-visit** to the surgery so the person can meet staff and see the room.

b) During the Appointment

- Ensure staff are aware of the person's needs.
- Support **choice of practitioner** (many prefer a female clinician).
- Encourage a **step-by-step approach**, explaining what will happen next.
- Allow breaks if the person feels overwhelmed.
- Provide comfort aids (music, sensory items, or familiar communication tools).

c) After the Appointment

- Debrief: talk about what went well and what could be different next time.
- Support the person to understand their results in accessible language.
- Record successful adjustments so these can be repeated at future appointments.

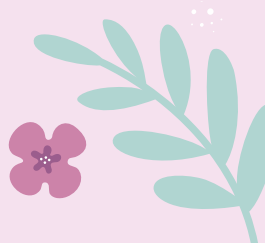
4. Case Studies



Case Study 1: Sarah

Sarah is 28 and has mild learning difficulties. She feels nervous about medical procedures and doesn't understand her screening letter. With her carer's support, she reads an easy-read leaflet with pictures and attends a pre-visit to the surgery. On the day, Sarah's carer stays with her in the room. The nurse explains each step slowly, and Sarah completes her screening successfully.

Learning Point: Accessible information and a familiar supporter can transform a potentially overwhelming experience into a successful one.



Case Study 2: Aisha

Aisha, 39, has more complex needs and limited verbal communication. Her care provider arranges a double appointment, informs the practice in advance, and brings visual aids to help Aisha understand the procedure. The nurse takes extra time, and although Aisha chooses not to go ahead on this occasion, she feels reassured.

Learning Point: Consent must always be respected. Even if someone declines, providing clear information and a positive experience builds trust for the future.



5. Reflection and Training Exercises

- **Discussion question:** How might you explain cervical screening to someone with limited understanding of medical terms?
- **Scenario exercise:** Imagine you support someone who becomes very anxious about unfamiliar environments. How could you prepare them for a cervical screening appointment?
- **Personal reflection:** Think of a time when you've supported someone through a medical appointment. What worked well, and what could have been improved?

6. Safeguarding and Consent

- Screening is always a choice.
- Consent must be informed, not assumed.
- Your role is to enable access, not to pressure.
- If an individual refuses, respect their decision, but make sure they had accessible information before deciding.

7. Quick Reference Checklist

- Accessible information provided?
- Longer appointment arranged?
- Supporter present if requested?
- Clear step-by-step explanation given?
- Adjustments recorded for future use?

8. Resources

- **NHS Easy-Read Cervical Screening Leaflets**
- **Macmillan Cancer Support** – Inclusive communication guides
- **Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Screening resources**

Conclusion

Small, thoughtful adjustments can make a life-saving difference. By planning ahead, advocating for reasonable changes, and supporting informed consent, care providers can help ensure that people with learning difficulties are not excluded from cervical screening programmes.