

# **Decommissioning bowel scope screening: communications handling plan**

## **1. Reactive lines and Q&As**

- Following expert clinical advice and consultation with professional bodies, the Secretary for Health and Social Care has supported the UKNSC recommendation that the NHS discontinue bowel scope screening from the NHS bowel cancer screening programme. The home testing – FIT Kit – programme will be extended from April 2021 and people that were invited for a bowel scope will instead be offered a FIT kit.
- The improved home testing FIT kit was introduced last year. It is easier to use and more accurate than the previous home testing kit.
- Bowel scope screening was being offered to people aged 55 in some parts of England, as a one-off preventative test, to look for and remove any small growths (polyps). Evidence showed that fewer people were accepting the offer of a bowel scope than expected. Bowel scope is a preventative test, and of those that have it, 0.3% will have cancer.
- Because of the increased number of people being referred for further tests due to the improved home testing kit and subsequently the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, bowel scope screening had stopped.
- The decision to decommission bowel scope screening was supported by the Secretary of State to allow a focus on the expansion of the home testing programme to include 50 to 59 year olds, meaning the programme will cover 50 to 74 years olds which is a key NHS commitment as part of the NHS Long Term Plan.

## **Q&As**

### **What is bowel scope screening?**

People aged between 55 and 60 are invited for a once-only bowel scope screen- a thin flexible tube with a tiny camera on the end to look inside the lower part of the large bowel for any polyps or cancers. People who are over 55 but have not attended for bowel scope could self-refer up to the time they are invited to receive the FIT home testing kit. While bowel scope screening was previously rolled out to people registered with around 60% of GP practices across the country, activity had already reduced prior to COVID-19 due to the increase in demand on bowel screening services following the introduction of the more sensitive and easier to use FIT kit. During the pandemic, bowel scope screening has stopped as the NHS prioritises available capacity for screening patients who need further tests following their bowel cancer screening FIT test result.

### **Why was the decision taken to decommission bowel scope?**

There are a range of reasons, in discussion with experts and stakeholders, that went into the decision including:

- Bowel scope screening was available in certain parts of the country creating variation in service delivery and people taking up the offer of the test was lower than expected.

- To continue to ensure that people that need diagnostic tests following a positive FIT test are received in a timely way and, following the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, continuing to focus on fully restoring the home testing programme.
- Bowel Scope screening not being provided in our devolved nations, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

It was also a recommendation by School of Health and Related Research (SchARR) to consider decommissioning Bowel Scope when the FIT home test was available to 55- year olds following extensive research. Decommissioning bowel scope screening will support the extension of the FIT home testing programme, which was a key NHS commitment.

### **Is a FIT kit better than a bowel scope?**

One test is not better than the other. There are different advantages to both. Uptake of bowel scope screening was lower than expected. The FIT home test kit is a much simpler test, done at home. Only a small proportion (currently 2-3%) of people who use the kit will need colonoscopy. The FIT kit detects bleeding from the whole bowel, whereas a Bowel Scope will only detect issues in the left side. The FIT kit is also universally rolled out across England which is an important part of reducing health inequalities across the country.

### **What will the impact be on people that were due a bowel scope?**

Bowel scope screening is a one-off preventative test, to look for and remove any small growths (polyps). Of the 140,527 people that took up the offer of a bowel scope in 2019/20, an average of 3.6% needed further tests (colonoscopy) and 0.3% go on to have a cancer diagnosis. Around 56,000 people have been invited for bowel scope in 2020/21 but have not been screened. They will be offered the FIT kit from April 2021 as an alternative and we expect to have significantly higher uptake of this than we would have had following the offer of bowel scope screening.

### **What plans are in place to extend the age cohort the NHSEI bowel cancer screening programme?**

We will be lowering the age range of the FIT kit home testing programme for 60 to 74 year olds to include 50 to 59 year olds as stated in the NHS Long Term Plan, in a phased way over the coming years. To safely and ethically lower the age range we need to plan increased diagnostic capacity and expand the workforce so that people that need follow up tests can get them in a timely way.

### **As you are stopping a service, won't there need to be a national consultation?**

Consultation was undertaken led by PHE with key stakeholders as part of this nationally directed service change as per the statutory duties of commissioners to formerly consult with stakeholders under the s13Q of the NHS Act 2006 (as amended by the Health and Social Care Act 2012) for NHS England. This has been a nationally agreed change therefore local consultation will not be required.

However, where substantial changes are proposed to NHS services commissioners have a separate duty to consult the local authority under the Local Authority (Public Health, Health & Wellbeing Boards and Health Scrutiny) Regulations 2013 ("the 2013 Regulations") made under s.244 NHS Act 2006. Regional commissioners will need to understand their position in relation to their local duties to engage with their local authorities, populations and providers.

## **Will this mean staff will need to be retrained? Won't there need to be a formal consultation?**

We have been engaging with staff working in bowel scope screening in 2020/21 to ensure we retain these skilled and experienced members of staff. There is currently significant demand for endoscopy throughout the NHS, and we are committed to deploying the Bowel Scope workforce to help meet this demand in both bowel screening and symptomatic bowel services.

We estimate that around 90% of Bowel Scope endoscopists are already able to perform colonoscopies. For the remainder, the HEE Clinical Endoscopist Programme offers immediate funded opportunities to upskill from flexible sigmoidoscopy to colonoscopy, and to train to undertake flexible sigmoidoscopy and/or colonoscopy (depending on existing training), or upper gastrointestinal endoscopy. Cohorts are scheduled to commence in January, April & September 2021. Whilst numbers on cohorts may be limited, places will be prioritised for applicants from the existing bowel screening workforce.

Throughout this process we are aiming to strengthen the endoscopy workforce, increase access to training, and deliver better integration between screening and symptomatic services. Ultimately, this will deliver a better service for patients. Regional commissioners are fully engaging with Trusts who employ Bowel Scope staff in line with HR requirements to ensure wherever possible these staff can continue to use their skills to help patients and diagnose cancer earlier.

## **2. General stakeholder brief**

### **Decommissioning bowel scope screening and expansion of the home testing (FIT kit) programme**

Following expert clinical advice and engagement with stakeholders including the UK National Screening Committee (UKNSC), NHSEI has made the decision to decommission bowel scope screening, supported by the Secretary of State, to allow a focus on the expansion of the home testing programme to include 50 to 59 year olds, meaning the programme will cover 50 to 74 years olds which is a key NHS commitment as part of the NHS Long Term Plan. The NHS plans to extend the home testing – FIT kit – programme from April 2021.

The decision to discontinue bowel scope will also allow a continued focus on fully restoring the bowel screening programme for 60 to 74 year olds following the impact of COVID-19 and ensure that people are receiving any follow up diagnostic tests in a timely way.

People that have already been invited for a bowel scope will be offered a bowel screening home testing kit

Bowel scope screening was being offered to people aged 55 in some part of England as a one-off preventative test to look for and remove any small growths (polyps). Of those that have bowel scope, 0.3% will have cancer.

Evidence showed that fewer people were accepting the offer of a bowel scope than expected. Due to the increased demand for services following the introduction of the FIT home testing kit last year – an easier to use and more sensitive test – and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on services, bowel scope screening had stopped.

The NHS continues to work with partners including the bowel screening workforce, on plans to further strengthen the bowel screening programme going forward, in line with the Professor Sir Mike Richards [Review of adult screening services](#). This includes immediate funded opportunities for training, upskilling and career development to help meet the workforce needs arising from the bowel screening age extension.