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Bhoireannaich agus Spòrs
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Cllr Raymond Bremner
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Our Reference: 202300341990
Your Reference: Breast Screening

2 March 2023

Dear Councillor Bremner,

Thank you for your recent correspondence, dated 23rd January, regarding locations of breast screening services across the Highlands.

Firstly, I concur with the Council's recognition that early diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer is of vital importance to women across the Highlands. Please be assured that there is extensive consideration given to the location of mobile units to meet the needs of the population and minimise the inequity of service, however it is appreciated that the mobile units cannot attend all locations without impacting on efficiencies and delivery of the service to the population. The following will outline the extent of that extensive considerations, and I hope this sheds some light for the council on the locations chosen for breast screening mobile units across NHS Highland.

The North screening centre within NHS Highland is responsible for providing a breast screening service to the eligible population within NHS Highland, Western Isles and a small area of Grampian. The programme in this area serves a population of ~45,000 eligible women, inviting them for breast screening once every 3 years. The service operates from the screening centre at Raigmore and has access to one mobile unit which serves the more remote and rural areas. All women attending for screening who are required to attend for further assessment would be invited for another appointment at the screening centre at Raigmore Hospital.

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It is not uncommon for participants attending breast screening across Scotland to have to travel to an appointment and mobile units are utilised to support screening in rural locations to minimise the travel requirements and to support equity of service. When siting a mobile unit, the Service consider public transport arrangements, distance to be travelled, liaise with local personnel (e.g. Councillors, GP practices) and require to consider the geography and facilities available at sites to support provision of the service. Across the population covered by NHS Highland, an average distance of 15 miles to attend screening may be required.

However, despite the challenges presented in providing breast screening for more rural areas, uptake of breast screening in the Highlands continues to be above the national average. In the three year rolling period ending March 2021, uptake for Breast Screening in NHS Highlands was 77.2%, compared with Scotland's national average of 73.2%. This has shown to be historically consistent with NHS Highland having higher uptake than that shown nationally.

The locations of Helmsdale and Brora, as mentioned in your letter, host a total screening population of 472 and a travel distance of 12 miles (16 minutes by car). The current plan is to screen from Brora mid to end of March 2023 and for the mobile unit to visit Helmsdale later this year, however a re-evaluation of both sites will be required before a final decision is made.

Brora remains a preferred site because, as you have stated, one GP practice covers the villages of Brora and Helmsdale, and approximately 70 percent of the practice population is in the Brora area where the mobile unit is sited. Screening this total population would take approximately 8 days, and by attending one site, efficiencies can be gained which save approximately one day of screening which allows over 60 women to be screened sooner rather than later. With only one mobile unit required to support screening the population, fewer locations can minimise the downtime and maximise the efficiency and capacity for screening appointments, thereby reducing waiting times for the eligible population.

Whilst it is appreciated that the train and bus links, are limited and cover areas further North such as Wick and Thurso also, the 12 mile distance is below the average travel distance in this area. In addition, there are a number of local community initiatives with the Brora Community bus and Helmsdale Community Transport who may be able to assist with supporting transport needs and appointments can be changed to support travel arrangements.

Thank you again for your correspondence. I hope the information provided has been useful to you.

Yours sincerely,



Maree Todd MSP

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