

HEALTH AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
28 AUGUST 2024

DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH ANNUAL REPORT 2023 - 2024
WOMEN'S HEALTH: TAKING ACTION IN DARLINGTON

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The Women's Health Strategy for England, published in 2022, recognised that the health system has historically taken a 'men as default' approach in areas such as clinical trials, education and policy. With this in mind, this year's annual report has considered key areas of women's health, with the aims of highlighting inequalities that girls and women face and understanding what this means for Darlington.

Summary

2. Although generally on average women live longer than men data shows that women can spend a greater proportion of their lives living with ill health and disability, a trend which is also evident in Darlington. Of the average 81.3 years of life lived, women can expect only 60.6 years of good health. This means that women in Darlington spend approximately 20.7 years in ill health or with disabilities. In contrast, men spend 17.7 years dealing with health issues. Consequently, the gap in healthy life expectancy (1.1 years) is much smaller than the gap in average life expectancy.
3. The *first chapter* of the report focuses on early years and adolescence, emphasising the importance of giving every child the best start in life. It highlights the importance of prioritising the health of women during pregnancy, as a healthy pregnancy benefits both mother and baby.
4. Therefore, areas of focus include breastfeeding, where rates of breastfeeding continuation in Darlington have improved. Now all staff in the 0-19 Service are trained in infant feeding and relationship building, meaning that they are able to offer skilled and effective support to families when they are facing challenges with infant feeding.
5. The *second chapter* focuses on women's health services. In Darlington, Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination rates are above regional and national averages for both males and females. However, to further increase uptake and address gender disparities (as females tend to have higher rates of this vaccination) targeted interventions should prioritise educating parents about the vaccine's importance and dispelling any misinformation.
6. Cancer screening coverage for Darlington in breast and cervical (both 25-49 and 50-64 years) exceeds both the regional and national averages, which is encouraging. However, efforts are underway to further improve uptake and address inequalities in uptake, including digital transformation and increasing greater accessibility and flexibility of programmes to meet the needs of all of our communities.

7. Mental health is a crucial consideration for all women, given the national focus on addressing declining mental health among women and the suboptimal outcomes experienced by some in mental health services. While suicide rates (per 100,000 population) are higher for males than females locally, regionally, and nationally, in Darlington the suicide rate for women exceeds the national average by more than double. Additionally, when examining mental health in young people in Darlington, the rate of emergency hospital admissions for intentional self-harm among females aged 10- to 24-year-olds is significantly higher than for males. This drives our local average above both the regional and England averages, highlighting the need for targeted interventions in this area.
8. It is essential to understand the reasons for the increasing suicide rate amongst women and the significantly higher rates of intentional self-harm. This understanding will inform targeted activity aimed at reducing female rates of self-harm and suicide rate in Darlington, alongside targeted interventions for males.
9. The *third chapter* focuses on employment and wellbeing, addressing topics such as menopause, period problems, and miscarriage in the workplace. Furthermore, this chapter explores how the gender pay gap is a crucial concern for women, given that income significantly influences a range of health outcomes.
10. Chapter 3 also examines the predominantly female composition of the NHS and social care workforces, highlighting the role of employers in recognising and supporting employees who also have unpaid caring responsibilities.
11. Recent research in Darlington highlighted the challenges faced by single mothers and female caregivers in balancing employment with their caregiving responsibilities. The disproportionate impact of the cost-of-living crisis and the stress of affording household necessities can impact health outcomes for groups of women negatively.
12. *Chapter 4* focuses on the importance of women's safety on their ability to live a healthy, fulfilling life. Some types of violence against women and girls, such as being touched or threatened, are so 'normalised' that many do not feel like it is worth reporting.
13. While both men and women experience sexual and domestic abuse, women are more likely to experience abuse. Furthermore, the government's Women's Health Strategy for England highlights that some groups of women are at higher risk of experiencing violence and abuse than others.
14. DASVEG (Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Executive Group) is the local domestic abuse partnership board and takes a whole system approach to ensure victims of domestic abuse have access to adequate and appropriate support. The governance structure in place across the system aims to reduce domestic abuse and sexual violence through effective partnership working across County Durham and Darlington.
15. Addiction to substances and alcohol also impacts on the ability of women to live happy, healthy and safe lives. The hospital admission episodes for alcohol-specific conditions in under and over 18's is lower than the North East average, but higher than the England average.

16. Within the treatment population in Darlington, 32.6% are women. STRIDE (Support, Treatment and Recovery in Darlington through Empowerment) supports women through treatment and recovery through specific programmes which aim to meet the specific needs of women, such as mothers and women's groups. This enables women to connect with and support one another in treatment and within wider recovery support.
17. Ensuring safe and accessible physical activity for women is crucial for their health and well-being. At Eastbourne Sports Complex, 'women's only' running sessions are available during autumn and winter. These sessions provide a well-lit, secure, and welcoming environment for women to exercise during darker months.
18. Menopause is an important and natural aspect of ageing well for women. Research indicates that not enough women have appropriate information about menopause and its symptoms, and a significant proportion of women do not feel comfortable talking to healthcare professionals about menopause. Darlington Borough Council hold 'menopause learn and lunch' sessions to provide information to employees about the menopause and how to support women experiencing it. The GP Federation, Primary Healthcare Darlington, offers a 'Well Woman Clinic', where a specially trained Nurse practitioner can give advice on various aspects of women's health, including menopause.
19. Considering healthy ageing is essential for women's health, and it forms the *final chapter* of the report. Since the 2011 census, Darlington's population age structure has shifted. The proportion of the population aged 65 years and over has shown the greatest increase, rising by 19.9% in 2021, surpassing the England average of an increase of 18.4% in the same period.

Recommendations

20. It is recommended that:-
 - (a) All organisations identify their role in giving every child the best start in life.
 - (b) All organisations recognise the specific health and care needs of women and take steps to ensure services are well positioned to respond to these needs.
 - (c) Organisations collectively take responsibility to create a safe environment for all people of Darlington, being mindful of implications from a female perspective.

Reasons

21. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons: -
 - (a) The initial stages of a child's life are pivotal for their growth and progress. Mothers hold a distinctive and key position in the development of their child. Regardless of their direct involvement in childcare, organisations have a part to contribute to the advancement of children's development, either directly or through the support they provide to employees and / or those accessing services.
 - (b) Women have unique health and care needs that differ from men, including reproductive health, mental health, and chronic diseases. Tailoring services to meet the specific

needs of women can improve the quality of care, lead to better health outcomes and reduce inequalities.

- (c) A safe environment is essential for people’s well-being and quality of life. Being mindful of implications from a female perspective ensures any specific vulnerabilities and needs of women are considered in policy and practice. When organisations collectively take responsibility, it fosters a sense of community cohesion and shared ownership over the safety of the whole community.

Lorraine Hughes
Director of Public Health

Enc: Director of Public Health Annual Report, 2023/24

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

Lorraine Hughes

Council Plan	This report supports the Council Plan priority of Living Well as it focuses on health outcomes, access to services and understanding needs specific to women.
Addressing inequalities	The report considers inequalities experienced by women and actions which could be taken to reduce such inequalities.
Tackling Climate Change	There are no implications arising from this report.
Efficient and effective use of resources	This report has no impact on the Council’s Efficiency Programme.
Health and Wellbeing	The annual DPH report considers the health and wellbeing of women in Darlington, highlighting what is good and areas for improvement.
S17 Crime and Disorder	There are no implications arising from this report.
Wards Affected	All
Groups Affected	The annual DPH report focuses on women’s health.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not recommend a change to the Council’s budget or policy framework.
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	N/A

Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers
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