



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

Improving equity in screening: A Strategic Framework 2023-2027

Midway report, covering activity in 2024-2025



Introduction

Improving equity in screening: A Strategic Framework 2023-2027 was developed to address equity in screening in Ireland. We know that some population groups that don't participate in screening often have higher incidence of the diseases that can be prevented and detected early by screening. People can experience barriers at any point on the screening pathway, and we want to better understand and address these barriers. We want everyone to understand what screening is and to participate in screening, if they want to.

Progress to date

This midway report highlights key progress we have made implementing the actions of our Equity Action Plan 2024-2025. Of the 12 actions in our Equity Action Plan, we have completed three, with significant progress made implementing all other actions. We will continue our work implementing these actions and include them in our 2026-2027 Equity Action Plan.

More examples of our work to improve equity in screening are available at hse.ie/equityinscreening.



Action No.	Action Plan Implementation Phase	Timeframe	Status
Research and Data			
1a	Improve the measurement of equity in screening through the analysis of equity stratifiers, such as area level deprivation	2024-2025	In progress
Equity Stratifiers - As part of the development for AIRE (BreastCheck Information Management System) in 2023-2024 a standardised set of equity stratifiers and defined values were agreed and incorporated into the dataset. These aligned with HSE Social Inclusion recommendations and Central Statistics Office (CSO) data categories. This means that we will have the ability to record this data on our breast screening register when it becomes available. Geocoding - We have been working to improve the regional data that we can share with stakeholders through a geocoding project. This work will continue in 2026 and 2027. - By geocoding screening participants' area of residence, we will be able to assign a deprivation index, based on measures of local area-level deprivation, to everyone on our screening registers. - This will facilitate monitoring of participation in, and outcomes from, screening, according to deprivation status. Geocoded data have been received for three of the screening registers (Diabetic RetinaScreen, BowelScreen and CervicalCheck).			
1b	Monitor the outcomes of the strategic framework to improve equity in screening	2024-2025	In progress
Monitoring - We developed a plan to monitor and evaluate the Equity Strategic Framework. The evaluation model outlines our intended short-term outcomes (over four years) and longer-term impact and provides a template for monitoring the implementation of the framework. This will enable an evaluation team to assess the progress made by the NSS over the five-year period of the framework. - In addition to the overall monitoring and evaluation plan, individual equity projects regularly reported on progress using the appropriate governance channels.			

Action No.	Action Plan Implementation Phase	Timeframe	Status
Education, learning and development			
2a	Conduct a learning needs analysis on the understanding of equity in screening among NSS staff and screening providers	2024	Complete
Findings - We completed a learning needs analysis in 2025. All NSS staff (n=500) and Patient and Public Partnership (PPP) representatives were invited to participate in an online survey. - There was a 16% response rate to the survey with representatives across the programmes, departments, PPP representatives and Diabetic RetinaScreen contracted service providers providing feedback. - The top four training opportunities that respondents felt were most relevant to their roles were general health equity training (49.4%), dignity at work training (40.5%), training on the Assisted Decision-Making Act (ADMA) (39.2%) and consent training (36.7%).			
2b	Develop an education, learning and development plan for NSS staff regarding equity in screening	2024	Complete
Plan Based on the feedback from the learning needs analysis, a plan was developed in 2025. Key actions from the plan included: - Promote existing HSE resources to staff and share the list of equity-related eLearning modules to all NSS staff and service providers. - Share relevant equity resources and links to our equity-related work in the staff newsletter. - Provide staff with short, recorded webinars on 'Improving health equity through screening' and 'Improving equity in action at the NSS'. - Complement, promote and share existing equity learning opportunities and resources across the NSS e.g. PEU research webinars, STU webinars, etc.			

Action No.	Action Plan Implementation Phase	Timeframe	Status
Education, learning and development			
2c	Deliver the education, learning and development plan (related to action 2b)	2025	In progress
Delivery of plan Actions from the education, learning and development plan that were completed in 2025 included: • ‘Equity in Action’ articles published in the NSS staff newsletter highlighting links to equity-related websites, blogs, training courses and podcasts. • Webinars on Consent and Assisted Decision Making (ADM) and Equity in Action were delivered to NSS staff and PPP members. Evaluation feedback was positive, and suggestions on sub-topics will inform further webinars. • A health equity-related resource list was developed and communicated to all NSS staff and PPP lead.			



Action No.	Action Plan Implementation Phase	Timeframe	Status
Partnership			
3a	Collaborate with the six HSE Health Regions to improve equity in screening via strategic partnerships, sharing screening data and resources to improve equity in screening	Ongoing	In progress
National - We have engaged with national public health teams (including Health Improvement, Health Intelligence and Health Service Improvement) and Regional Public Health teams. We have been working to improve the data that we can share with them through a geocoding project. We aim to make more progress in this area in 2026 and 2027. - Good progress has been made on the development, piloting and implementation of tools and resources to support screening uptake. Further details are below. Community Champions - Through our <u>Community Champions</u> project, we have partnered with community health workers in many parts of Ireland. We educate and train local health workers to support people in their communities to take part in screening. We then work with them to address barriers that prevent their community members from taking part in screening. - We piloted the project in 2024 and <u>trained</u> 40 people across five pilot sites in Ireland. - We published <u>an evaluation of our 2024 pilot project</u>. The report shows that our community champions reached people in many communities including migrants, Roma, Travellers, disabled people, homeless people, the LGBTQI+ community, refugees, people who live in deprived areas, and people with addiction. - In 2025, we trained 54 people to become community champions across two groups: - The Roma Health Network is a network established by HSE Social Inclusion which includes regional HSE teams, Roma support projects, Roma helpline staff, Roma outreach teams and Roma community members from across Ireland. - HSE Dublin North City and County (DNCC) Community Healthcare Organisation includes social prescribers, community connectors and community health promotion and improvement officers. - Through their strong links to communities and their outreach work, these groups are helping more people to access, understand and take part in screening.			

Action No.	Action Plan Implementation Phase	Timeframe	Status
Partnership			
3b	Ensure that health equity is a guiding principle in the way we deliver screening through enhanced collaboration across the NSS and with our screening providers	Ongoing	In progress
Embedding equity across the NSS - We gathered feedback from our staff, PPP representatives and Equity Oversight Committee when we asked for their views on equity. They talked about the increasing consideration given to equity in their day-to-day work and how equity is a regular item on agendas at programme management meetings. - We also recruited an Equity Manager who has been in post since November 2025. The purpose of this role is to lead on the implementation of the Equity Strategic Framework priorities and to play a key role in ensuring integration, shared learning and opportunities to embed equity in screening across the four screening programmes and the wider organisation. Limerick Prison - An example of collaboration with screening providers is the <u>CervicalCheck partnership with the female section of Limerick Prison</u>. This trauma-informed cervical screening initiative improved access, increased awareness and reduced stigma with women saying it feels safer and less traumatic with the introduction of an on-site screening model. Community Champions - Another notable collaboration was the Community Champions project to support <u>Ukrainian women to access breast screening in Cork</u>, which provided screening to 39 Ukrainian women from three accommodation centres.			

Action No.	Action Plan Implementation Phase	Timeframe	Status
Access and inclusivity			
4a	Implement the recommendations from the 2023 NSS disability needs assessment research report (<i>Breaking Down Barriers, An Assessment of the Needs of Disabled People in Accessing Population-Based Screening Services in Ireland</i>), (aligned to action 2b).	2024-2025	In progress
Report implementation - We have implemented 16 of the 36 report recommendations from the <u>disability needs assessment research report</u>. A further 16 recommendations are in progress and four are outside of the remit of the NSS to implement. - Of the 16 recommendations in progress, we expect 12 to be completed by the end of 2027. Four are longer-term projects (e.g. development of a single register and capturing disability status of screening participants). <u>Key deliverables</u> include <u>staff training on disability awareness</u>, creation of <u>a guide to screening for carers</u> to help carers and the people they support access screening, and a campaign leading to <u>increased diversity of our PPP</u>. - We have shared our learnings and presented our work nationally, including at the <u>world's first conference addressing cancer care for people with intellectual disabilities</u> and with our European partners as part of the <u>EUCanScreen project</u>, which aims to make cancer screening more accessible and more equitable.			
4b	Develop equity-related decision-making aids to support NSS programmes in their equity work.	2024-2025	In progress
Equity tools - We conducted a search of published literature regarding health equity impact assessments and equity proofing tools designed for the health sector. - We summarised the information and determined which of the existing tools could be adapted for screening. - We developed a health equity impact assessment tool for screening with NSS staff and patient representatives. - A workshop is planned for early 2026 to finalise this tool. Following the workshop, the tool will be piloted. - We developed a decision-making aid to support equity-related partnerships in 2024. This aid helps to systematically assess inequities faced by a particular community and helps to identify potential benefits of a partnership.			

Action No.	Action Plan Implementation Phase	Timeframe	Status
Access and inclusivity			
4c	Ensure that all relevant projects, such as the decision-making tools, are informed by a behavioural science approach	2024-2025	In progress
Inclusion of behavioural science - Using an evidence-based behavioural science approach, a <u>toolkit</u> was developed to help support community workers to encourage people to take part in screening. - It is designed for local community health workers who take part in our <u>Community Champions project</u> and complete our training. - The toolkit helps people to plan and carry out targeted activities that make screening more accessible and more equitable for everyone.			



Action No.	Action Plan Implementation Phase	Timeframe	Status
Communications			
5a	Continue working to ensure our communications enable informed choice for all people who are eligible for screening	Ongoing	In progress
Communications toolkit We created a communications toolkit that gives us a common foundation for planning and delivering written communications. It includes guidance on how to: • apply our principles of communication • be consistent with our tone of voice and identity • use plain, inclusive language • plan and write news reports which enable greater informed choice • use a consistent style and language. Videos in Irish Sign Language We produced <u>videos with Irish Sign Language (ISL)</u> about our four screening programmes. This is part of our ongoing work to improve access to our screening programmes and to improve equity in screening. We want people who use ISL to have the information they need to make informed choices about taking part in screening. We worked with the Irish Deaf Society to produce the videos. Creating accessible and co-designed information Our team ensures that our information is developed using behavioural insights and subject matter expertise and aligns with our communications principles. We work with our PPP to ensure our information meets the needs of its intended audiences. Our 41 PPP representatives are a diverse network who have helped to create: • videos and factsheets about our screening programmes in different languages • a guide to screening for carers and the people they support • new BreastCheck invitation letters using the WHO ‘Better Letters’ framework • communications materials to encourage people to use a new registration webpage to consent for bowel screening.			

Action No.	Action Plan Implementation Phase	Timeframe	Status
Communications			
5b	Develop an NSS digital platform on the NSS website to enable communication and resource sharing on projects to improve equity in screening with our stakeholders.	2024	Complete
Equity portal • A new <u>equity portal</u> has been created on the NSS corporate website. • It hosts information on equity in screening, including all published details on our equity projects, presented according to our five framework priority areas i.e., research and data, education, learning and development, partnership, access and inclusivity and communications. • Regular blogs highlight equity work across the NSS. • A list of useful resources is provided, including <u>contact details for our equity team</u>.			



Progress and challenges to date

We gathered feedback on challenges and lessons learned during the first two years of implementing the framework. We conducted an online survey of NSS staff and PPP representatives. We met with our Equity Oversight Committee to gather their inputs, and we also met with public health colleagues working to improve equity in screening across the UK. In addition, we reviewed relevant research and strategies published since the last framework.

NSS staff and PPP representatives' survey results

Feedback from our survey indicated that since the framework was published, NSS staff and PPP representatives:

- have improved their knowledge and awareness of equity
- consider health equity more in their day-to-day work
- are tailoring the service more to meet people's needs
- include health equity in educational materials on screening.

A sample of quotes from survey respondents below highlights the prominent role equity-related work has had in the NSS since the strategic framework was first implemented.

'It is obvious that the NSS is really applying equality and equity in all its programmes and through processes.'

PPP representative.

'Newly appointed to the NSS, I have observed in my relatively short time here. Equity...is without doubt a core theme in screening and is raised, considered and reviewed at most meetings... with local teams or at corporate level. It is undoubtedly a key pillar, a key objective and principle in how we work.'

Staff member

'I am actively trying to engage more disenfranchised women (women's refuge, drug and alcohol) and provide education and availability of a rapid access screening clinic through the colposcopy unit.'

Staff member

'Technology and information gaps are hampering planning and evaluation of equity initiatives.'

Staff member

'I am thinking deeply about our communications principles, tone of voice and values.'

Staff member

Feedback from the Equity Oversight Committee

The Equity Oversight Committee provided the following feedback. The committee members felt that:

- the support of the NSS senior leadership team has been key to making improvements and addressing barriers to screening
- having a clear strategy and an action plan shows organisational commitment to improving equity and has created focus for action
- equity is becoming more embedded as a guiding principle in the way screening is delivered through, for example, regular discussion at management team meetings
- the NSS is taking a more co-ordinated approach to improving equity in screening.

Feedback from colleagues working in screening in the UK

Public health colleagues working to improve equity in screening across the UK said that:

- strong leadership and governance are crucial
- shared learning is strengthened through networking
- tools such as equity impact assessments can help
- considering barriers that can occur at each part of the screening pathway (communicating, screening, testing, diagnosis and treatment) is important.

Challenges to achieving equity in screening

The main challenge identified was a lack of relevant data and difficulty measuring progress towards achieving our goals. NSS staff, PPP representatives and the Equity Oversight Committee recognised the need for better data to identify inequities in participation, and to assess the impact of interventions to improve equity. Small area data showing screening coverage at a local level is needed, as well as more analysis based on equity stratifiers, such as ethnicity or country of birth. Small area data could allow for targeted initiatives to improve screening uptake in areas where coverage is lowest. We need to do more to identify the quantitative impact of our work.

Challenges in service accessibility were identified as a barrier to achieving equity in screening, with feedback from stakeholders pointing to the need for flexible scheduling and varied communication methods (including digital options) to ensure that different literacy needs are catered for. Some issues related to the wider health system.

Equity Oversight Committee members mentioned the need to continue to focus on equity across our programmes and to continue learning from each other. There was an emphasis on the value of 'leaning into the wider system', such as the six new HSE Health Regions, recognising that an overall aim of the HSE is to improve population health and that through working together, we could do more.

Next steps

The publication of this midway report is an important milestone and is a key deliverable outlined in our *NSS Strategic Plan 2023-2027*.

The next steps after the publication of this report are the following:

- Establish a new governance structure for equity-related projects under the Public Health Senior Management Team.
- Develop a detailed action plan for 2026-2027 for equity in the NSS.
- Continue to implement the monitoring and evaluation processes to measure our performance.
- In 2028 we will conduct an evaluation on the equity strategic framework to assess the NSS's progress in equity over the five-year period.

The NSS looks forward to continuing to work with key partners on the continued implementation of this equity framework.





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