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# HIV services at the crossroads: Northern Ireland

**In May 2025, HIV Outcomes, a coalition of HIV experts working to improve the quality of life for people living with HIV in the UK, published ‘HIV Services at the Crossroads: the role of the voluntary sector and needs of communities’.**

This briefing – produced jointly between HIV Outcomes and Positive Life NI – focuses on the situation and experience of HIV voluntary sector services in Northern Ireland and highlights what we believe are the essential recommendations that must be taken forward to support people to live well with HIV.

## Introduction

Life-changing Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) services are greatly needed and valued in Northern Ireland by people living with HIV. There is a continued demand for services supporting their health and wellbeing, and with the continued experience of stigma affecting their quality of life, alongside waning levels of HIV awareness in key demographics, the case is clear for continued investment.

However, the dedicated services are under serious threat from severe funding challenges and action is needed so that no one gets left behind, and to work towards the goal of ending new HIV transmissions by 2030.

# Recommendations for the Northern Ireland Executive

- **Deliver on the HIV priorities set out in the Sexual Health Action Plan.** The Northern Ireland Executive should commit to funding and actioning its commitments on HIV.
- **Designate NI as a Fast Track Region.** The UNAIDS 2030 target gives a specific, measurable and time-bound goal for a region-wide approach to reaching zero new HIV diagnoses in Northern Ireland. A region-wide commitment by the Health Minister is necessary to overcome Northern Ireland's unique local authority political barriers.
- **Commitment to Region-wide HIV testing.** Opt out Emergency Department-based testing pilots have been rolled out more widely in England. A publicly-backed and well-promoted regional testing initiative is one of the strongest routes to ending unintentional HIV transmission.
- **Long Term Funding to VCSE HIV Services.** An HIV Action Plan for Northern Ireland must include a long term commitment to sustaining VCSE-led support services aimed at improving quality of life for people living with HIV, supporting ongoing training, education and awareness-raising to break stigma and prevent HIV transmission.



# Delivering on the priorities set out in the Sexual Health Action Plan

**Northern Ireland's HIV response is laid out within the NI Department of Health's Sexual Health Action Plan (2022). Specifically for HIV, it states the key objective to:**



**Reduce new HIV transmissions by minimising the number of people getting HIV, ensuring prompt testing and diagnoses, and tackle stigma.”**



**The key actions include:**

- “Explore access to treatment and support services across the region.
- Explore becoming involved in the Fast Track Cities initiative to eliminate HIV.
- Minimise late HIV diagnoses.
- Identify & tackle key issues associated with specific at-risk groups.
- Address public awareness and stigma.
- Identify and address any shortfalls in professional communications and understanding and identifying cases of HIV”.

While work has been progressing slowly, this Action Plan has **no dedicated budget to support its delivery.**

**Without a timely, targeted and funded programme of actions to deliver this plan, the Northern Ireland Executive's target to reduce HIV transmissions is at serious risk.**

For context in other regions, Wales has a dedicated HIV Action Plan for 2023-26; England has had an HIV Action Plan in place from 2022-25 and is about to launch a new HIV Action plan for 2025-30; and Scotland has a detailed Delivery Plan aimed at ending HIV Transmission in Scotland by 2030.

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# Fast Track Cities 2030



**At a time of need,  
you all helped me  
beyond expectations”**

– Man living with HIV  
and Positive Life service user

## **The UNAIDS Fast Track Cities initiative aims to eliminate new HIV diagnoses by 2030**

In other countries, Fast Track Cities is delivered at municipal (local authority) level. Northern Ireland's size and scale (approx. 1.95 million) have offered the opportunity to designate it as a **“Fast Track Region”**.

Under the leadership of community organisation, Positive Life, supported by the NI Public Health Agency, several of Northern Ireland's 11 local councils have signed up to a pledge to become a Fast Track City (including its two major cities, Belfast and Derry~Londonderry and others). However, party political positions and council democratic structures mean that not every council will support a motion to sign up to the initiative.

**The asks within Fast Track Cities are straightforward:**

**TESTING** Access to regular pop-up local HIV testing

**END STIGMA** Anti-stigma education and training for public officials

**AWARENESS** Awareness and education for local communities, younger people and key demographics

**In order to achieve region-wide activation, the support of the NI Health Minister will be required to designate Northern Ireland as a “Fast Track Region” driving towards the 2030 goal.**

## **Voluntary and Community Sector Adding Value to Clinical Services**

Positive Life is the only voluntary organisation dedicated to HIV in Northern Ireland. It provides wrap-around, holistic support, including peer support, counselling, treatment advice, family programmes, social activities, and public education.

Last year, 80% of Positive Life's new service users were referred by GPs, hospital consultants, and sexual health clinics and other healthcare professionals - clear evidence that clinicians see the charity as a direct support partner to the NHS.

These services complement HIV clinical care and reach people traditional health services often cannot.

People living with HIV in Northern Ireland highlight the value of HIV VCSE services in meeting their needs to manage their treatment, deal with stigma, reduce isolation and improve their mental health and wellbeing.



# Life Changing Impact of the Voluntary Sector

**VCSEs are an indispensable partner in the HIV response. In Northern Ireland, Positive Life's unique reach, trusted relationships with communities, and high-quality person-centred care is vital if we are going to achieve the UNAIDS target of ending HIV transmissions by 2030.**

**HIV Testing** Positive Life also delivers pop-up HIV testing and provides free, confidential in-person testing and counselling, a vital part of ending HIV transmission and ensuring early access to treatment.

**Public Awareness and Breaking Stigma** Positive Life works to challenge outdated myths and misconceptions about HIV, it delivers education, training and awareness to break stigma, and it works to promote positive messaging around sexual health.

**Supporting people living with HIV to live well** The vital practical, emotional and wellbeing services provided by Positive Life connect with a community of more than 1,300 people living with HIV, aimed at supporting them to live well.

**Tackling Health Inequalities** HIV VCSEs across the UK address the wider needs of people living with HIV, with Positive Life providing psychosocial support alongside practical support and information on issues such as benefits, housing, living well and immigration. As one participant in our Belfast focus group noted, 'HIV organisations have always worked with people on issues outside of HIV status, as they are the organisations they trust'.

**Mental Health Impact** Beyond therapy, peer support, and community connection, Positive Life offers something irreplaceable: a stigma-free, judgement-free safe space.

The mental health benefits are profound - recently diagnosed service users have said that without Positive Life, they would not be here today. The work of the voluntary sector is saving lives, providing specialist mental health support, and keeping people living with HIV out of other over-stretched health services.

**One Positive Life service user, living in Derry, explained that Positive Life "help me understand the psychology behind my feelings".**

**This direct, local support transformed his wellbeing, taking him from a "very dark place" to being "the best I have ever been".**

**The impact of VCSE is felt greatest in communities facing significant health inequalities:**

**Older people** People with HIV are living longer and facing a new range of age-related health concerns, as well as loneliness and isolation

**Foreign nationals** A significant proportion of new HIV patients in Northern Ireland have been previously diagnosed elsewhere and they require connection to health services, interpreters and social care, coupled with cultural intelligence relating to HIV, confidentiality and discrimination.

**VCSE Underfunded and Over-Stretched**

Positive Life has been hit hard by funding cuts. The organisation has been forced to significantly reduce staff, and draw on cash reserves just to maintain its work. Despite leading region-wide efforts to tackle HIV, Positive Life faces an uncertain future.

# VCSE Supporting the NI Sexual Health Action Plan Objective on HIV

## Minimising Late HIV Diagnosis

The latest statistics from the Department of Health in NI show that **late diagnosis** remains a significant concern. This has **serious consequences for both individual health and onward transmission**.

Ensuring that people living with undiagnosed HIV in Northern Ireland are tested and linked into care is critical.

Awareness, breaking stigma and access to testing are of the utmost importance to reduce late diagnosis and end unintentional HIV transmission.

Key opportunities for earlier diagnosis in Northern Ireland are being missed.

## The Importance of HIV Testing and Prevention Initiatives

Northern Ireland lacks a dedicated national HIV testing campaign.

Experience from England and Wales shows that national testing campaigns led by HIV VCSEs can significantly increase testing uptake, linkage to care and combat stigma. With adequate and sustained investment, Positive Life is well placed in Northern Ireland to expand and normalise testing, driving progress towards ending new transmissions.

Positive Life delivers free, confidential rapid HIV testing alongside outreach testing and awareness raising activities in community settings.

VCSE **outreach and community testing** are vital for reaching people who may not engage with traditional services. Culturally specific outreach and peer-led approaches have been particularly effective in engaging underserved communities, including the LGBTQ+ community and foreign nationals; however, this is limited by resource.

**Targeted outreach requires sustained investment in VCSE staff, translation and outreach programmes.**

Northern Ireland does not have the **opt-out HIV testing** which was successfully piloted in EDs in several NHS Trusts in England.

**If Northern Ireland is to reach the 2030 UNAIDS goal of eliminating new HIV diagnoses by 2030, a region-wide testing campaign is the most effective route to preventing transmission and ensuring early access to diagnosis and treatment.**

## Support for At-Risk Groups: PrEP

A priority in the NI Department of Health's Sexual Health Action Plan is to assess PrEP uptake and use the findings to guide targeted awareness-raising.

PrEP is not yet reaching its full potential in Northern Ireland, with a lack of awareness and barriers to access for many groups, particularly Black African communities, women, and trans people. While VCSE organisations such as Positive Life and the Rainbow Project have worked to raise awareness of PrEP and how to access it, **sustained statutory funding for the planned awareness-raising** (similar to arrangements in England and Wales), would strengthen community outreach, increase PrEP uptake, and help reduce HIV transmissions.



## Challenging Stigma and Discrimination

Stigma remains one of the biggest challenges for people living with HIV in Northern Ireland. Reducing it requires tackling deep-rooted societal prejudices and misinformation. As one VCSE representative put it at our focus group, “we know people living with HIV in Northern Ireland experience stigma disproportionately compared to other places in the UK”, often alongside intersecting inequalities linked to sexuality or migration status.

## GP / Health Professional Communication

Focus group participants stressed the need for a broader approach to HIV awareness in healthcare, particularly among GPs. They noted that healthcare-related stigma discourages people from disclosing their status and deters some professionals from offering HIV tests due to internalised bias.

A survey conducted by Positive Life found that while two-thirds of people living with HIV reported good experiences in primary care, the remainder had “quite horrific” ones.

Around half of GPs were still unaware of PrEP or U=U (Undetectable = Untransmittable) – modern HIV treatments bringing viral load so low that the virus cannot be passed on via sexual transmission.

A sample search of GP websites in NI also revealed outdated public health advice and information for patients.

**This underlines the urgent need for targeted education of health professionals, where VCSEs could play a key role in developing and delivering training.**

**Stigma from healthcare professionals remains a serious problem. ‘Grace’ (not her real name), a woman living with HIV, turned to Positive Life for support. She recounted overhearing a healthcare provider gossip about her HIV status to a colleague - after mistakenly thinking they had ended the call – and saying, “yuck, she’s just a lost soul”. The inappropriate disclosure deeply affected her wellbeing and violated her rights.**



## Further information and partnership

For more information on HIV Outcomes UK, and to download the full ‘HIV Services at the Crossroads’ report, please visit: [www.nat.org.uk/hiv-outcomes](http://www.nat.org.uk/hiv-outcomes).

If you have any questions or would like to arrange a meeting, please get in touch with us at [HIV.Outcomes@nat.org.uk](mailto:HIV.Outcomes@nat.org.uk).