

UMBRELLA LANE

SEX WORKER WELLBEING PROJECT

STI testing for
Sex Workers in
Scotland during
Covid-19

T: (+44) 7377 518263



@umbrellalane



@umbrellalane



@umbrellalane



In a world of “new normals” resulting from the effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic, Sex Workers’ needs have yet again been marginalised. Increased experiences of stigma and structural violence compared to nonmarginalized communities pre-pandemic have only been made worse by loss of income and job insecurity, and further deprioritisation of sexual health by governments [1]. This is most immediately apparent in the gap of STI testing access experienced by Sex Workers across Scotland. In Scotland, anyone requesting a STI test – whether symptomatic or not – must make an in-person appointment, with testing-only clinics serving as the only introduced adaptation to business as usual and no access to home testing kits without prior appointment.

In the best of times, Sex Workers encounter barriers to testing access including but not limited to inconvenient clinical hours, high cost, travel logistics, safety, provider attitudes and stigma. Now, additional difficulties have been added to what was already a complex system of care. New messaging around STI testing, for example, which indicated that only symptomatic testing was of any necessity has already been linked to increased anxiety and confusion in other vulnerable populations in the UK [2]. The WHO warns that the “majority of STIs have no symptoms or mild symptoms that may not be recognized as an STI” and is further backed up by the American organisation, Healthline, which recommends that anyone who is sexually active should get tested regularly regardless of presence or absence of symptoms [3, 4]. Furthermore, knowledge of personal and partner status increased safety, particularly for Sex Workers. In a 2020 study, knowledge of status was found to be linked not only to decreased HIV transmission but also to more positive mental health [5].

We are calling for the use of STI home testing kits for Sex Workers during, and continuing beyond, the pandemic.

Home kits, like those that have already been successfully implemented in London since the start of the pandemic, provide “discreet sexual health services” for anyone with internet access [6]. The process is simple for a kit in London: after completing the short online consultation, a kit with all necessary supplies will be mailed to the address indicated within a few days and once completed, can be returned by resealing and dropping in the post. Clinical teams deliver results via text or email, again, within days. The whole process is quick, private, safe, clinically-lead and free. These are feasible for implementation throughout Scotland, particularly in well-resourced urban areas, given that it is sponsored by NHS England. Home testing has the potential to help out overburdened health systems – an often mentioned effect of the COVID-19 pandemic – in that it can save time and money for both patients and providers, especially given that Sex Workers’ time with physicians is often already limited [5]. In comparison with outsourcing to third-party companies, NHS-sponsored home testing allows for opportunities to connect health promotion messaging, monitoring, treatment and support that may otherwise be lost [2].





STI home testing kits are one strong step towards protecting the health of more than 500 Sex Workers connected through Umbrella Lane and reinforce the importance of considering their health through a public health lens rather than a criminal justice lens. Our communities are only as healthy as those marginalised. While the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the inequality and discrimination present in our communities and health systems, it also affords us an invaluable opportunity to shift priorities and create a more equitable health care network. We would like to take this opportunity to thank individual healthcare providers who have went above and beyond to ensure prioritised access to testing and treatment for Sex Workers in Scotland and hope they will stand with Umbrella Lane to call for a commitment from Scottish Government to mitigate and remove barriers to testing for those marginalised before, during and after the pandemic.

Thank you to Hayley Conyers student of London School of Hygiene and Tropical Hygiene studying for an MSc in Reproductive and Sexual Health for her invaluable research and insights on this piece.

Links for STI Testing in Scotland

<https://www.sandyford.scot/sexual-health-services/people-who-need-extra-support/>

<https://www.sexualhealthscotland.co.uk/the-clinic/do-i-need-a-test>

<https://www.nhsinform.scot/care-support-and-rights/nhs-services/sexual-health/sexual-health-services-online-appointments-booking-system>

<https://www.sandyford.scot/sexual-health-services/testing/>

Resources



1. Platt, L., et al., Sex workers must not be forgotten in the COVID-19 response. The Lancet, 2020. 396(10243): p. 9–11.
2. Lewis, R., et al., Disrupted prevention: condom and contraception access and use among young adults during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic. An online survey. BMJ Sexual & Reproductive Health, 2021: p. bmjsrh-2020-200975.
3. WHO. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs). 2021; Available from: [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/sexually-transmitted-infections-\(stis\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/sexually-transmitted-infections-(stis)).
4. Vandergriendt, C. Everything You Need to Know About At-Home STI and STD Tests. 2019.
5. Ortblad, K.F. and J.D. Stekler, HIV self-testing: finding its way in the prevention tool box. BMC Medicine, 2020. 18(1): p. 373.
6. Home STI testing, regular and emergency contraception. 2021; Available from: <https://www.shl.uk/>



**UMBRELLA
LANE**

Thank you for reading

Visit www.umbrellalane.org

to join our community and hear more about our work. You can also follow
our updates at Facebook, Instagram & Twitter

Email:

hello@umbrellalane.org

for more info

T: (+44) 7377 518263



@umbrellalane



@umbrellalane



@umbrellalane