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Breaking Barriers in Cervical Screening for Neurodivergent Patients

- Giving patients choice and flexibility to put them in control of their cervical screenings.
- Empowering GP practices to provide a ND-friendly service.
- Training staff in neurodiversity to ensure a common understanding between nurses and patients.
- Free resources to help GP practices promote truly inclusive screening.

New initiative empowers GP practices and clinics to provide inclusive, person-centred cervical screening experiences.

Start Differently today announces the launch of the Neurodiversity-Friendly Cervical Screening Chartermark, a new quality mark recognising GP surgeries and clinics that demonstrate a commitment to accessible, respectful, and neurodivergent-friendly cervical screening services.



Research shows that only 30%* of autistic people and people with learning disabilities attend cervical screenings, compared with 75% of the general population, highlighting significant inequalities in access and experience.

Cervical screening is a vital public health service that helps detect early signs of cervical disease and preventing cervical cancer. Yet many neurodivergent women and people with a cervix face significant barriers to participating in traditional screening pathways.

“This project comes out of my lived experience: by the age of 40, I had only been tested twice, and one test didn’t work. Self-testing doesn’t work for me, and I’ve been on a waitlist for 2 years for a test under general anaesthetic. This is clearly unacceptable,” says Sara-Louise Ackrill, Director and Trustee of Start Differently.

“My mission is to change the cervical screening landscape for neurodivergent women and people with a cervix.”

About the Chartermark

The Neurodiversity-Friendly Cervical Screening Chartermark recognises healthcare providers who go beyond standard practice to create truly inclusive screening environments. Awarded practices have:

- Completed specialised neurodiversity awareness training.
- Adapted environments to reduce sensory challenges.
- Updated policies to offer more choice and control.
- Incorporated patient feedback into ongoing improvement efforts.

“With this Chartermark, we are helping ensure that everyone, regardless of how their brain works, feels safe, understood, and in control when accessing healthcare,” adds Sara-Louise Ackrill.

“Neurodivergent people deserve screening experiences that respect their needs without compromise.”

What It Means for Patients

From quiet waiting areas and flexible appointment options to communication tailored to individual preferences, the Chartermark signals that a service has taken meaningful steps to reduce barriers and redesign cervical screening with neurodivergent people in mind. Clinics awarded the mark will display it prominently in waiting rooms and online, helping patients confidently identify practices committed to inclusive care.

Supporting Practice Involvement

Primary care providers across the UK are invited to join the initiative. There is no cost to participate, only a commitment to co-designing and implementing changes that make cervical screening safer and more accessible for neurodivergent patients. Start Differently provides training, resources, and ongoing support to help practices make a real difference.

The Chartermark builds on Start Differently’s Neurodiversity-Friendly Smear Testing Project, which has engaged GP surgeries in co-design to identify key needs and best practice solutions.

“We’re pleased to share that we are working with Start Differently to make our cervical screening service as supportive and inclusive as possible for neurodivergent people and for anyone who feels nervous about screening.” says Roanna Gray, GP Partner at Thornfield Medical Group

Join the Movement

Practices interested in earning the Chartermark, or individuals and advocates who want to learn more or share their experiences, are encouraged to visit startdifferently.org.uk or contact ndcs@startdifferently.org.uk.

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References

*Source: [University of Manchester website](#) (accessed on 29/01/26)