



Why Scotland Needs a National STI Postal Testing Service

Evidence Briefing

About STI Postal Testing

STI postal testing is when a free STI test is posted to a recipient's home in plain packaging. STI postal tests are ordered online, by phone, or by text message. Once a test arrives, it can be taken at home or somewhere that is comfortable for the recipient.

With some STI postal tests, the results can be accessed in minutes by looking at the test itself. With others, a sample is posted to a laboratory and the results are returned by text message or email a few days later. Alternatively, results can be made available to a recipient by contacting a secure phone line. STI postal testing services are sometimes referred to as 'e-STI' testing services or 'internet accessed STI' testing services.

Existing Evidence

STI Postal Testing Increases Uptake

Addressing access to sexual healthcare services is a major public health concern, with poor sexual health linked to a range of adverse effects on mental and physical health. Poor sexual health also continues to disadvantage communities already marginalised by socio-economic and health inequalities. This has led to an increasing interest among services and policy makers in exploring strategies that improve access to sexual healthcare in Scotland. One such strategy is the provision of remote sexual healthcare services, including STI postal testing.

A considerable amount of literature has been published evidencing the efficacy of STI postal testing services. These studies have shown that STI postal testing services are an effective public health strategy to increase uptake among groups at higher risk of STIs.¹ For example, young people under 25 in Scotland experience higher rates of STIs,² but are less likely to perceive STI risks.³ However, studies such as those conducted by Habel et al.⁴ and Goward et al.⁵ show that STI postal testing may be an efficient and effective way to provide STI testing for students and young

people who have never accessed STI testing, thus increase testing uptake. Similarly, men who have sex with men in remote and rural areas do not test for STIs as frequently as those living in urban areas.⁶ This group has nonetheless been found to want more convenient access to sexual health services.⁷

STI Postal Testing as Part of Sexual Healthcare Provision

While research shows the potential of STI postal testing in removing access barriers for high risk groups, several studies highlight that this must be complementary to the provision of in-person services. Gilbert et al.⁸ highlight that STI postal testing services increase uptake, but some testing barriers can only be addressed through increasing access to clinical services. In the same way, den Daas et al.⁹ conclude that STI postal testing can hold an important role when offered in tandem with regular testing options.

Our Research

At Waverley Care, we carry out research with communities at higher risk of poor sexual health and blood-borne viruses. Our research exploring access to and preferences for remote sexual health services has found:

- Almost **75% of young people surveyed in Highland were unaware of STI postal testing** but would use STI postal testing if it was available to them.¹⁰
- **One in five men who have sex with men living in remote and rural Scotland had never accessed STI testing.** Contrastingly, respondents frequently cited having the option to order STI tests by post would improve their access to sexual healthcare.¹¹

I think sending STI tests is a great idea; not only does it help the more shy and less confident people, but it always helps people who are embarrassed and scared of going somewhere face to face.

Online kits would be the single, most effective thing that could be done for the rural communities. I've noticed they are available in cities but not out here, which seems insane.

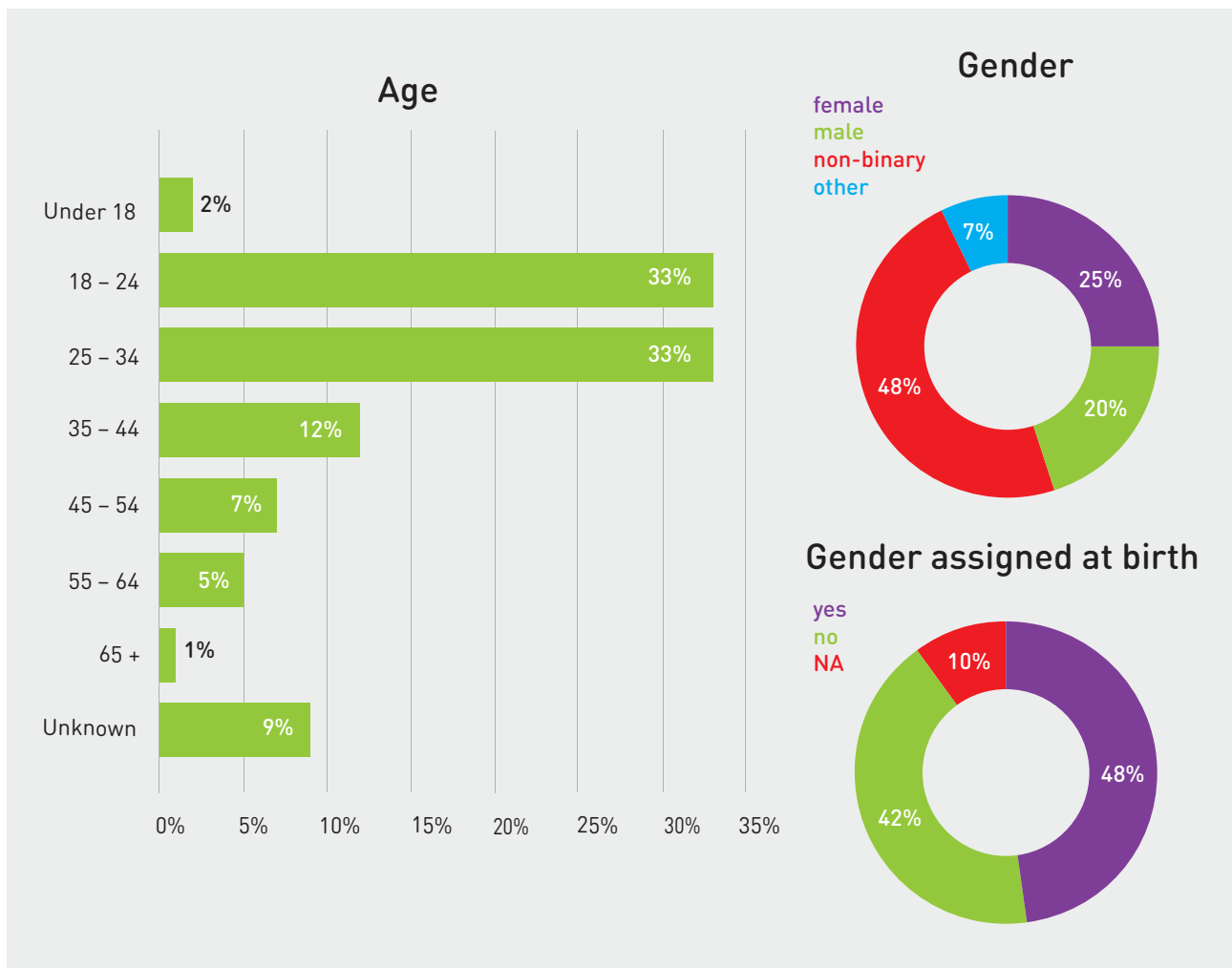
These findings make clear that when offered in addition to in-person sexual health services, STI postal testing services can mitigate financial, geographical, and psychological barriers that prevent high risk groups from accessing testing. In the same vein, groups in Scotland at higher risk of STIs, like young people and men who have sex with men living in remote and rural areas, want access to services remotely.

Pride 2022 Survey

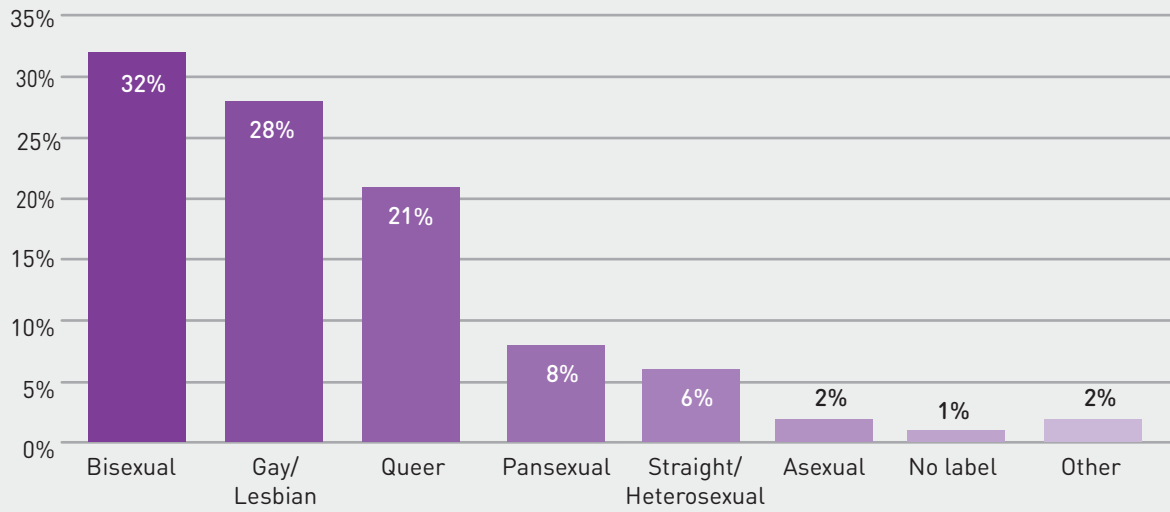
Expanding on our published research, we surveyed people attending three Scottish Pride events in 2022 to find out:



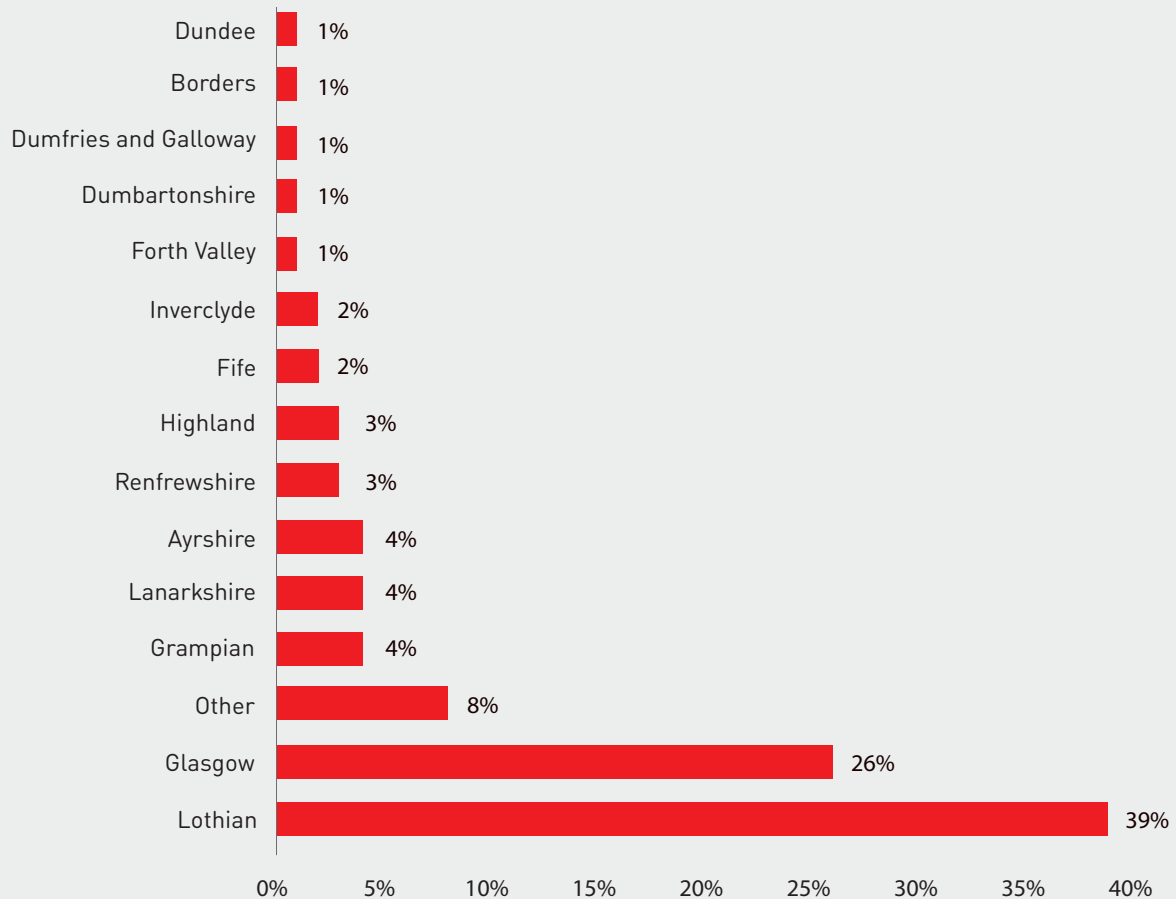
The Pride events took place in **Glasgow, Lothian and West Lothian**, and as such were inclusive of two urban areas and one rural area. We surveyed **298 respondents** in total, the demographics and characteristics of which were as follows:



Sexual orientation

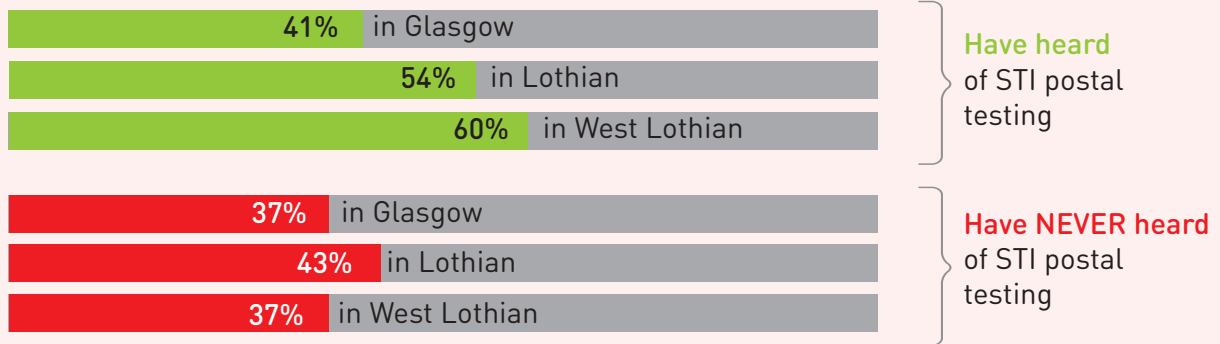


Respondents by area

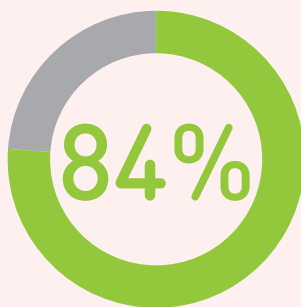


Findings

Awareness of STI Postal Testing

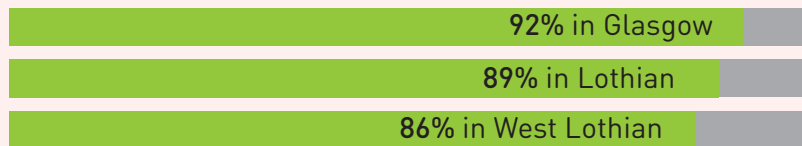


Ordering STI Postal Testing



WOULD ORDER an STI test if it was made available to them free and by post

WOULD ORDER an STI test



Would NOT order an STI test



Accessing STI postal testing



57%

would access an STI postal testing service from a **SEXUAL HEALTH CLINIC**



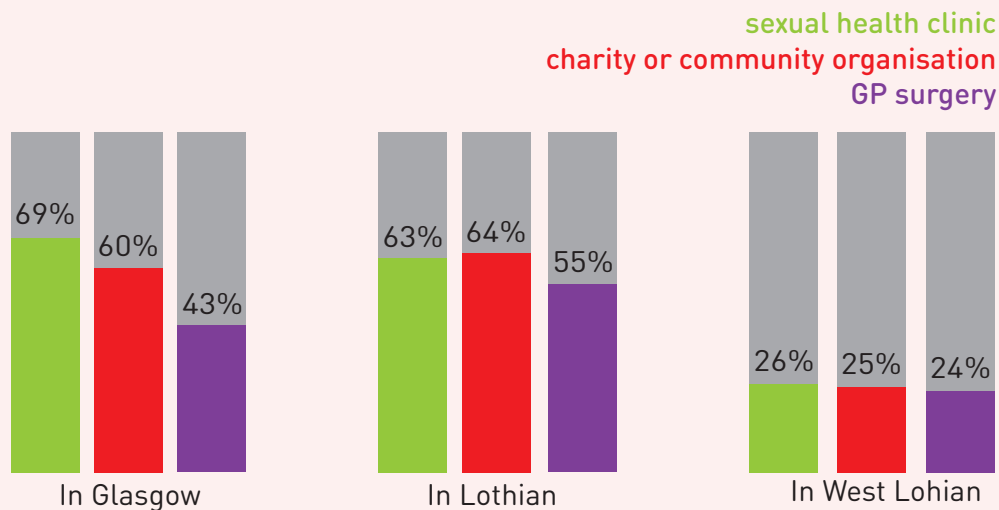
54%

would access an STI postal testing service from a **charity like WAVERLEY CARE**



46%

would access an STI postal testing service from a **GP SURGERY**



Conclusion

The results of our Pride 2022 survey show there is mixed awareness of what STI postal testing services are. However, once informed of what constitutes STI postal testing services, there is resounding agreement that such services should be made widely available in Scotland. Mirroring the findings of existing research, STI postal testing services should be located as complementary to clinical sexual health services. Consequently, provision through sexual health clinics, charities like Waverley Care, or GP surgeries, offers a clear pathway to increase uptake of STI testing among high risk groups across Scotland.

Collectively, the evidence generated through Waverley Care, national and international research, clarifies a critical role for the provision of a national STI postal testing service in Scotland.

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