

Background of the MSK Programme

The programme started in 2023 to deliver the changes required to address the variation in community and secondary care MSK waiting times across our seven places in North East London and deliver more activity in the community in accordance with national guidance for MSK pathways.

The work identified five of our seven places requiring urgent increase in capacity for their respective community services. These were Barking & Dagenham, Havering, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest. In addition, as part of the equitable access across NEL, the getUBetter digital tool will also be extended to City and Hackney.

New funding is limited and savings from reduced diagnostics and reduced outpatient activity has to pay for the additional staffing. This formed the business case and an investment of £4 million into services which was approved in April 2025.

Further Information can be found here - [Musculoskeletal – North East London](#)

Key Changes	Aim
Increasing community service workforce through recruitment using the approved funds from the business case	To reduce existing community backlogs and increase capacity to enable community providers to assess patients for physio and MSK services in a timely way and manage more activity away from secondary care services.
Implementation of MSK Single Points of Access (SPoA) in all Places	To clinically triage and enable the managing of more MSK patients (80-90%) in the community. To enable our NEL secondary care providers to meet their 18 week RTT target in orthopaedic services, improve conversion rates to surgery, reduce discharge at first appointment.
Changing GP Direct Access to MRI	Align MSK diagnostics to best practice guidelines. Associated cost savings are reinvested into MSK community services
Investment into the getUBetter digital tool for all NEL place populations and adding in Pain Management module, extending app to City and Hackney place	To support MSK activity reductions by empowering patients and promoting prevention, with earlier access to self management advice, education & rehabilitation.

Latest Progress

- GPs now only have access to a single referral form, titled 'Non-MSK MRI Referral Form' for Non MSK MR imaging.
- Patients presenting to primary care who require MSK assessment/support will now be referred directly to the MSK Community Service for assessment and consideration of diagnostics, in line with MSK pathways.
- All services will maintain 2 week urgent referral waits to APP (ESP) services to support MRI changes
- Staff have now been recruited by all four services with ongoing recruitment for more to be in place in the next few months
- MSK referral criteria & Urgent MSK guidance can be found here [Musculoskeletal – North East London](#)

Note – these are estimations only at this stage	
Next steps – estimated timelines	Planned for completion (subject to change)
Finalise contract agreements with 3 community providers	July 31st – Oct 2025
Staff recruited in full (partial will be earlier)	Sep 2025– Mar 2026
Backlog Clearance	From Sep 2025 – Mar 26
Single Point of Access for MSK services	March 2026 – June 2026
6 week average wait achieved	From January 2026 in some places

Programme key risk(s)

- Recruitment takes time to get the right people in post and some services may find it more difficult than others.
- Delays in recruitment may:
  - Delay to full Single point of access going live
  - Delay backlog clearance
  - Impact on waiting times for community MSK services – this is being actively monitored via MSK Delivery Board governance.

NEL MSK Programme Implementation - Waiting Times & Progress Update

December 2025

Place	Provider	Overall Average Wait for Routine First Appointment	Overall Average Wait for Urgent First Appointment	Latest updates on progress
Barking & Dagenham	North East London Foundation Trust (NELFT)	Tier 2 (APP/ESP): 6 weeks Physio: 39 weeks	Tier 2 (APP/ESP): 1 week Physio: 2 weeks	Shared approach to staffing with Havering. Total of 4 posts have successfully been recruited to across the two services, with start dates from November 2025. Additional roles currently at interview stage and others out to advert. Service continue to prioritise urgent referral process.
City and Hackney	Homerton Healthcare (Locomotive)	Tier 2 (APP/ESP): 4 weeks Physio: 11 weeks	Tier 2 (APP/ESP): 1 week Physio: 2 weeks	Changes to eRS and single point of access being developed. Get U Better App rolled out across practices and implemented into locomotor services.
Havering	North East London Foundation Trust (NELFT)	Tier 2 (APP/ESP): 7 weeks Physio: 11 weeks	Tier 2 (APP/ESP): 0 weeks Physio: 2 weeks	Refer to Barking & Dagenham above
Newham	East London Foundation Trust (ELFT)	Awaiting Data	Awaiting Data	Service continues to manage waiting lists and prioritise patients.
Redbridge	Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospital (BHRUT)	Awaiting Data	Tier 2 (APP/ESP): 2 weeks Physio: 2 weeks	BHRUT has successfully recruited to 10 posts, with start dates from October 2025. Redbridge aim to have waiting time to 6 weeks shortly and will ensure any urgent referrals are prioritised to mitigate MRI access change.
Tower Hamlets	Barts Health	Tier 2 (APP/ESP): 8 weeks Physio: 21 weeks	Tier 2 (APP/ESP): 2 weeks Physio: 2 weeks	Barts has successfully appointed to 5 posts in Tower Hamlets, with start dates from December 2025. Recruitment for remaining posts is ongoing. Urgent referrals continue to be prioritised to manage impact from MRI change.
Waltham Forest	Barts Health	Tier 2 (APP/ESP): 8 weeks Physio: 14 weeks	Tier 2 (APP/ESP): 2 weeks Physio: 2 weeks	Barts has completed recruitment for all 12 posts in Waltham Forest, with appointed staff starting from October 2025. This will ensure capacity will manage any issues around MRI changes and clear waiting lists quickly.

What does Physiotherapy (Tier 1) offer?	What does Advanced Practice Physio (APP) / ESP (Tier 2) offer?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Band 5-7 Physiotherapy Team</li><li>MSK Assessment &amp; Treatment – personalised care approach: can include manual therapy, exercise prescription, group exercise, advice / education, rehabilitation programmes.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Band 8 Physiotherapy Team</li><li>MSK Assessment &amp; Diagnostics (as appropriate)</li><li>Can include joint injection therapy &amp; prescribing.</li><li>Direct links with secondary care services i.e. ortho / neurosurgery.</li></ul>
Please see guidance here on referral criteria for Tier 1 & 2 services. <a href="#">Musculoskeletal – North East London</a>	

Next steps

- GP Portal is currently being updated for all Places to ensure the latest MSK pathways, including those for urgent referrals, are clearly reflected. Please see guidance here on referral criteria for Tier 1 & 2 services. [Musculoskeletal – North East London](#)
- Each Place is developing an SPoA plan, with implementation planned from March 2026 – June 2026.