

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

- Community MSK services have started designing their Single Point of Access (SPoA) models and are working with Primary Care to ensure the referral pathways within the SPoA are appropriate and clinically effective.
- Primary Care to continue to signpost patients to the GetUBetter app for self-management support. [GetUBetter – North East London](#)
- 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.
- 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)
Staff recruited in full (partial will be earlier)	Sep 2025– Mar 2026
Backlog Clearance	From Sep 2025 – May 26
Single Point of Access for MSK services	May 2026 – June 2026
6 week average wait achieved	From June 2026

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

March 2026

Place	Provider	Tier 1 (Physiotherapy): Average Wait for First Appointment	Tier 2 (APP/ESP): Average Wait for First Appointment	Latest updates on progress
Barking & Dagenham	North East London Foundation Trust (NELFT)	Overall Average Wait: 34 Urgent Wait: 1	Overall Average Wait: 8 Urgent Wait: 4	The service is prioritising patients waiting over 52 weeks and has scheduled additional “blitz” clinics in the coming months to ensure all long-waiters are seen. The service have stated that all urgent referrals are triaged and seen within 2 weeks.
City and Hackney	Homerton Healthcare (Locomotive)	Overall Average Wait: 8 Urgent Wait: 2	Overall Average Wait: 6 Urgent Wait: 2	The service are now recovering a slip in performance due to some staff vacancies. Average waits remain at 8 weeks for the Physiotherapy service and should return to 6 weeks in the coming months. Urgent appointments have improved to 2 weeks.
Havering	North East London Foundation Trust (NELFT)	Overall Average Wait: 13 Urgent Wait: 0	Overall Average Wait: 10 Urgent Wait: 0	Havering MSK service has no patients waiting over 52 weeks and are prioritising those patients waiting between 18-52 weeks. The service is running blitz clinics to focus on this patient cohort and will be running a larger Community Assessment day in the coming months.
Newham	East London Foundation Trust (ELFT)	Awaiting Data	Awaiting Data	The service is managing patients in approx average of 8 weeks with no long waiters. Specific data is expected by Apr 26.
Redbridge	Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospital (BHRUT)	Overall Average Wait: 16 Urgent Wait: 1	Overall Average Wait: 3 Urgent Wait: 1	BHRUT activity is increasing and the service has largely reduced their wait list. The Physiotherapy wait list has reduced by 1 week. Two additional “blitz” clinics are scheduled in March to further support the reduction in the wait list.
Tower Hamlets	Barts Health	Overall Average Wait: 16 Urgent Wait: 2	Overall Average Wait: 6 Urgent Wait: 2	Activity continues to increase significantly month on month which is in turn reducing the wait list. The service will be running additional assessment days in the coming months to support with list reduction. The service are projecting that the Physio service will reach a 10-week wait within Q1 2026/27.
Waltham Forest	Barts Health	Overall Average Wait: 11 Urgent Wait: 6	Overall Average Wait: 6 Urgent Wait: 3	Physio routine waits have reduced by 2 weeks. The service have stated that all urgent referrals are triaged and seen within 2 weeks. The service has continued to see an increase in referrals since MRI restrictions were introduced. The service is mitigating the impact by running additional in-house CAD days.

What does Physiotherapy (Tier 1) offer?

- Band 5-7 Physiotherapy Team
- MSK Assessment & Treatment – personalised care approach: can include manual therapy, exercise prescription, group exercise, advice / education, rehabilitation programmes.

What does Advanced Practice Physio (APP) / ESP (Tier 2) offer?

- Band 8 Physiotherapy Team
- MSK Assessment & Diagnostics (as appropriate)
- Can include joint injection therapy & prescribing.
- Direct links with secondary care services i.e. ortho / neurosurgery.

Please see guidance here on referral criteria for Tier 1 & 2 services. [Musculoskeletal – North East London](#)

Next steps

- Each Place is developing an SPoA plan, with implementation planned from May 2026 – June 2026.
- Community MSK services are continuing to engage with Primary Care to support collaborative pathway development.
- Community MSK services have engaged with LMC’s and will be presenting at PLT events across NEL