

Caithness & Sutherland Service Provision – Gynaecology: Return to Scottish Government

NHS Highland remains committed to delivering safe, person-centred care as close to home as clinically appropriate, in line with national policy and the needs of rural populations. Within Caithness and Sutherland, Obstetric and Gynaecology services are delivered through a Rural General Hospital model, supported by a resident Consultant who provides antenatal care, gynaecology outpatient services, and day-case procedures. The consultant based in Caithness currently runs three clinics per week.

A single, board-wide waiting list is in place for all gynaecology services, enabling improved utilisation of clinical capacity and equitable access for women across Highland. Waiting list performance is monitored weekly through the organisational governance structure to maintain visibility and support ongoing improvement. Patient location, travel requirements, and clinical safety remain central considerations at the point of booking.

The following sections address the areas highlighted for further comment.

1. Access to Gynaecological Care

Delayed identification of endometriosis

Delivery of services and diagnosis of endometriosis is a recognised challenge across Scotland and the UK. We await publication of the ESPRiT2 trial, which may offer opportunities for less invasive diagnostic pathways, including the potential for blood-based testing. In the interim, NHS Highland continues to use increased capacity through Waiting List Initiative (WLI) activity to reduce delays and improve access for all patients.

Delayed diagnosis of ovarian cancer

NHS Highland is experiencing significant workforce challenges in gynaecology oncology, reflecting national shortages in specialist-trained consultants. The service is currently delivered by a single-handed Gynaecology Oncology Consultant, supported by locum activity where available. Recruitment efforts are ongoing, but the limited national pool continues to impact resilience and capacity. This remains a recognised risk requiring coordinated action across Scotland and the wider UK.

2. Pain Management and Support

Concerns regarding overreliance on medication are understood. NHS Highland provides a range of non-pharmacological options, including:

- **Pelvic Floor Physiotherapy**, with an established pathway accessible to women across Highland.
- **GP access to specialist advice** through referral and clinical dialogue services for patient-specific symptom management.
- **Referral to the Pain Management Service**, where appropriate, to support holistic and multidisciplinary care.

In some cases, medication remains the safest or most clinically appropriate option, but alternative pathways are available and actively promoted.

3. Women's Health Services

Miscarriage services

NHS Highland has fully embedded the national Miscarriage Framework (DL 2025 (02) and welcomes recurring Scottish Government funding to support implementation. A recruitment plan is in place to strengthen early pregnancy and miscarriage care. A key priority is ensuring consistent pathways across rural hospitals in North Highland, including local follow-up after miscarriage. Work is underway within the early pregnancy midwifery resource in Community Midwifery Unit (CMU) settings to enhance continuity and support future pregnancies.

Menopause support

The specialist menopause service operates on a referral-only basis for women requiring complex medical care. Consultations are delivered by telephone, ensuring equitable access for women across Highland, including Caithness. Current waiting times are 3–4 months.

Highland Sexual Health has delivered multiple remote training sessions for clinicians across the region, and all patients have access to evidence-based information via the Highland Sexual Health website and NHS Inform.

Fertility services

NHS Highland accesses fertility assessment and treatment through a long-standing Service Level Agreement with NHS Grampian, the regional specialist centre. The

enhanced SLA introduced six years ago provides a well-functioning, integrated one-stop fertility pathway for women across Highland.

4. Mental Health and Wellbeing

NHS Highland is actively addressing the impact of long waits on women's mental health through:

- **The Waiting Well project**, delivered in partnership with MySelf-Management, offering non-medical, holistic support via Link Workers. This includes guidance on symptom management, emotional wellbeing, self-care, and healthy living through phone or Near Me appointments.
- **The North Highland Women's Wellbeing Hub**, a community-led organisation in Caithness that provides peer support and a trusted space for women to share concerns. The gynaecology service works closely with the Hub, with a shared action plan to ensure women's experiences inform ongoing service development.

This combined approach strengthens emotional support, reduces isolation, and helps women maintain wellbeing while awaiting treatment.