

# Public Health Observatories in England: regional nodes in an evolving system

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## The National Picture

In 1999, a comprehensive Government wide public health strategy for England “Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation” advocated the setting up of regional Public Health Observatories (PHOs). The Observatory objectives are broadly to:

- Monitor trends, highlight areas for action and give warning of future problems
- draw information together in new ways, carry out research and identify gaps
- advise on methods for inequality assessments and evaluate local progress in improving health

This presentation will overview the wide range of tools and outputs developed by eight regional observatories since their establishment. In particular, how our functions are developing after recent Department of Health strategies promoted PHOs to deliver intelligence needed within specific areas, for example to: develop closer links with cancer registries; establish Hospital Episode Services; and improve the access and use of drug misuse, infection and sexual health data. All of these functions are aimed at better integration of information systems between all government departments.

In addition, PHO roles have broadened since April 2002, when the health service in England underwent a major re-organisation, with the provision of health care devolved locally to around 300 Primary Care Trusts. Working closely with the Department of Health, National Statistics and other intelligence services, delivering health data at local geographical levels, whilst maintaining national and international standards, is paramount to policy implementation.

## A Regional Focus

The North West Public Health Observatory [www.nwpho.org.uk](http://www.nwpho.org.uk) is committed to using new technologies to carry out these functions and has developed a series of web based tools for the collation and dissemination of data, information and intelligence to public health professionals, students, the media and the public alike. Our diverse range of interactive tools provide immediate access to data and research reports as they are produced. For example, the latest in an annual series of HIV & AIDS reports now has an online database providing local area data at new geographies. Our other online data tools provide immediate mapping of a wide range of data and written health profiles on inequalities, sexual health and dental health for each local area.

At the regional level, we have been able to provide access to public health resources in a variety of different formats to allow our wide range of users link into the newly evolving public health system. We produce a weekly media column; regular health bulletins and research reports; searchable databases, including catalogues of data sources (metadata) and research; communication tools for health professional and academic networks; a public health skills analysis system; and a series of websites on various public health issues (eg. ethnic health, smoking, drug misuse, club health, older people).

The provision of geographical information on health is key to the functions of the Public Health Observatories in England. Our position as a regional node in existing and developing local, national, European and international intelligence networks provides an essential link between policy and practice.