

To ensure treatment and screening for cancer continues during COVID-19

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 10 Hydref 2022
Petitions Committee | 10 October 2022

Reference: SR22/3327/1

Petition Number: P-06-1286

Petition title: To ensure treatment and screening for cancer continues during COVID-19.

Text of petition:

To ensure all people struggling with cancer receive timely treatment and have equal chances of fighting cancer wherever they live in Wales. It is also essential to support families who have family members with cancer.

We want this petition to go far and to reach families who are struggling and to provide people with resources and facilities.

1. Background

Early diagnosis and rapid treatment are key to increasing the chance of cancer survival.

Some national screening programmes were paused in the early stages of the pandemic. COVID also impacted on the delivery of services, causing some delays for further diagnostic tests and treatments. In addition, there is evidence that



some people chose to defer seeking diagnosis and treatment. These factors have contributed to a backlog in cancer cases.

Research has shown significant reductions in cancer diagnoses in Wales during the pandemic, for example, there were over a thousand fewer new cases of bowel, breast and lung cancers diagnosed in Wales in 2020, compared to 2019.

According to stakeholders such as Target Ovarian Cancer, the pandemic has had a drastic impact on urgent referrals for suspected cancer from GPs and treatment waiting times.

Evidence suggests that many of the people now coming into the system are being diagnosed with cancers that have progressed to a later stage - with worse outcomes as a result.

A new suspected cancer pathway target was introduced on 1 December 2020. However, the latest waiting times data (June 2022) shows that **just 54 per cent of patients received their first treatment within 62 days** of being suspected of having cancer, well below the target of 75 per cent.

The Senedd's Health and Social Care Committee's recent inquiry on the impact of the waiting times backlog on people in Wales (April 2022), included a specific recommendation relating to cancer:

Recommendation 3. The Minister for Health and Social Services should work with NHS Wales and third sector organisations to develop and deliver a national campaign within the next 12 months to raise awareness of cancer symptoms, and to encourage people to access health services if they have any concerns. The campaign should also encourage people to take up invitations to participate in cancer screening programmes.

The Welsh Government accepted this recommendation, stating:

The Wales Cancer Network are working through a proposal which it will take to the Wales Cancer Alliance, and the Cancer Awareness Campaign Group to develop a campaign which will cover both raise awareness of cancer symptoms and encourage people to access health services if they have any concerns or symptoms of cancer. The campaign will also focus on the importance that screening plays in early diagnosis and outcome and will encourage people to take up invitations for cancer screening

programmes. This proposal will be presented to the Cancer Network Board in September 2022

2. Welsh Government response

The Welsh Government's response to the petition notes that cancer care was identified as an essential service that needed to be protected as much as possible from disruption during the pandemic. It highlights the new funding it made available to the NHS to support services; train new staff, including cancer care specialists; and invest in new equipment used in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer.

However, it acknowledges that while the pandemic was escalating, the capacity to deliver some cancer treatments was disrupted and many patients chose to defer treatment at this time. "This is likely to have an impact on cancer outcomes".

The Minister for Health and Social Services says she has "made recovery in cancer services a planning priority for the NHS". This has been supplemented by actions for cancer services in its Programme for Transforming and Modernising Planned Care (April 2022). The programme notes:

It is estimated that about 4,500 fewer people were diagnosed and treated for cancer than we might have experienced based on previous years. However, people are now presenting with suspected cancer at a higher rate than we have ever experienced.

The Welsh Government's quality statement for cancer outlines its broader approach to improving cancer services.

The Minister says NHS services have introduced a number of changes to pathways to speed them up and there are "nationally agreed pathways for most cancer types that all NHS bodies should seek to deliver". The response sets out further actions taken including funding to organise patient pathways; new digital software to assist operational managers for cancer to manage and track patient waiting lists; and the development of new training to support all the staff involved in delivering cancer pathways. The Minister concludes:

I am confident that this combination of focus, effort and support that is being brought to bear will make a significant difference to the delivery of cancer services in the future.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.