



Rt Hon Victoria Atkins MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
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Wes Streeting MP
Shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

Daisy Cooper MP
Liberal Democrats Spokesperson for Health and Social Care
House of Commons
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4 February 2024

Dear Ms Atkins, Mr Streeting and Ms Cooper,

We have good news – we can save more lives from cancer. We can save almost all lives from some of the most common cancers by preventing and catching them early on. Even better, we already have the tools we need, and there are exciting new methods on the horizon that will help improve diagnosis. But we are not making the most of these opportunities and emerging technologies. We are not saving as many lives as we could be.

This World Cancer Day, as the country approaches a general election, we are asking you to change that. Together, we are calling on you to commit to make sure cancer screening is at the heart of your plans for the National Health Service, now and for the future.

The impact of cancer screening has been undeniable. As well as preventing deaths, cancers diagnosed early can require less treatment, have a lower risk of recurrence, and can save the NHS money in the long-term.

- An estimated 1,300 lives from breast cancer are saved every year through routine breast screening, and research shows that if we increased uptake to 80% (achievable target) we would not only see more lives saved but also a net cost saving to the UK economy in the next ten years in the range of £96m to £111m and wellbeing cost savings at £1.2bn.
- An estimated 5,000 lives are saved from cervical cancer every year through routine screening, by preventing cervical cancer before it even starts. We have the opportunity to be one of the first countries in the world to eliminate cervical cancer, but this will take a coordinated cross-sector plan and resourcing.
- Screening is also one of the best ways to detect bowel cancer at the earliest stage when 9 in 10 people will survive, and in some cases, screening can prevent it from developing.
- NHS England's targeted lung health check programme was able to detect over three quarters of lung cancers at stages one or two.
- Diagnosing prostate cancer early is critical to saving the 12,000 men who currently die of this cancer every year.

However, our ability to make further progress on early detection and diagnosis through screening is not guaranteed. Sir Mike Richard's 2019 review of screening in England found that programmes were 'far from realising their full potential' and were not well positioned to take advantage of future innovations in screening. In 2023, the Chief Medical Officer acknowledged the continued under-prioritisation of screening programmes and called for an extension of these services 'to groups with reduced access and historically low uptake'.



Inequalities across programmes continue to leave people behind, and at a greater risk of late diagnosis. Record low levels in uptake, failure to fully implement medically recommended best practice, alongside outdated systems and disjointed structures prevents screening services from keeping pace and giving everyone a fair chance of cancer prevention and early diagnosis. We can create truly optimal, inclusive programmes that meet the needs of our current and future population, but it will take focus and ambition to do so.

There is a growing consensus that the future of the National Health Service will depend on our ability to shift the way we spend public money to focus on prevention, including investing in public health programmes like cancer screening. The Office of Health Economics 2023 report identified cancer screening as a key component of the health system's prevention plan. It makes clear that poor uptake, alongside insufficient capacity, short-termism, and underfunding, are leading to 'missed opportunities for effective prevention, and a healthier, more prosperous, nation.'

By optimising cancer screening and defining the right pathways, we can build an NHS fit for the future, deliver equality, and protect good health for generations to come. A revolution in technology is underway, which can rebalance the health and care system to focus on prevention, deliver more personalised screening, and make the NHS more efficient for the taxpayer. Cancer screening will be at the centre of this revolution. But to take advantage of these innovations and make the best use of limited resources, your plans for the NHS must consider the specific financing, workforce capacity, IT upgrades, and data collection needed to make this future possible.

We cannot afford to miss opportunities to save lives from cancer. And we do not have to.

As the heads of five leading cancer charities, we urge you to make the next election one in which cancer screening is prioritised. Ahead of the five-year anniversary of Prof Sir Mike Richards review of screening programmes in England, will you meet with us and work together to ensure cancer screening is at the heart of your plans for the NHS, now and in the future?

Yours sincerely,

Genevieve Edwards
Chief Executive Officer
Bowel Cancer UK

Baroness Delyth Morgan
Chief Executive Officer
Breast Cancer Now

Martin Hunt
Chief Executive Officer
Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust

Laura Kerby
Chief Executive Officer
Prostate Cancer UK

Mike Grundy
Deputy Chief Executive
Roy Castle Lung Cancer
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