

Improving cancer services, saving lives in Wales

Cancer Research UK's manifesto calls for the 2021 election

- **Commit to a new cancer strategy to transform services and improve outcomes**
- **Continue to prioritise earlier diagnosis of cancer in order to improve survival in Wales**
- **Develop an ambitious cancer workforce plan to ensure Wales has a workforce fit for the future**
- **Introduce legislation to restrict price promotions on junk food**
- **Set a target and take action to reach a smokefree target for Wales by 2030**



Securing a new cancer strategy for Wales

Cancer is the leading cause of death in Wales, with around 19,000 people diagnosed with cancer every year in Walesⁱ. Just over half survive their cancer diagnosis for 10 years or more, compared to 1 in 4 in the 1970sⁱⁱ. However, Wales persistently lags behind comparable countries for cancer survivalⁱⁱⁱ. While survival has improved in Wales, one-year survival rates for stomach, colon, pancreatic, lung and ovarian cancers fall below the UK average^{iv}. The number of confirmed cases of cancer will increase to 25,000 per year by 2035—an increase of 6,000 from today's levels^v. However, services are already struggling to keep up with existing patient need.

Cancer hasn't stopped during COVID-19 and NHS staff have worked exceptionally hard to keep urgent services running while responding to the pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 on cancer services and in Wales has been significant, as it has across the UK. Thousands have missed out on screening, and serious delays in people getting a cancer diagnosis and treatment has left a backlog that will take significant efforts to address. We must look beyond recovery and consider how to truly transform cancer outcomes in Wales and save more lives.

The Welsh Government's Cancer Delivery Plan came to an end in 2020 and has been replaced by a short Quality Statement for Cancer that lacks any detail on how cancer survival can be improved in Wales. We are now calling on the next Welsh Government to commit to a new cancer strategy. This would be a comprehensive programme designed to improve cancer outcomes and improve the quality of life of cancer patients, allowing for better management, more accountability and improvement of cancer services. It must commit to a new long-term roadmap that sets clear and ambitious objectives on earlier diagnosis of cancer, ensuring patients have access to the most effective cancer treatments, and supporting the cancer research environment.

We are calling on the next Welsh Government to work towards an ambitious new cancer strategy to ensure cancer services are fit for the future. This should contain a range of clear and measurable targets to improve cancer prevention, diagnosis and treatment and be funded to drive change.

Prioritise earlier diagnosis of cancer

If Wales caught up with the best performing nations for cancer survival, thousands of lives could be saved. Improving cancer survival will require diagnosing more cancers at an earlier stage, when they are more treatable. Awareness of the symptoms of cancer is another important component to improving early diagnosis, by ensuring that people know when to go to the GP and give confidence that they are not wasting the GPs time by doing so. Targeted public awareness campaigns can contribute to this, while seeking not to exacerbate health inequalities. Given the impact of COVID-19 on people contacting their GP about concerning symptoms, this is likely to be more important in the future, to reassure the public that they should seek help from their GP.

The next Welsh Government should make early diagnosis of cancer a priority by increasing capacity in diagnostic services, and delivering fully funded public awareness campaigns on the signs and symptoms of cancer.

Develop a sustainable approach to workforce

Longstanding staff shortages in Wales' cancer workforce have limited the progress made in early diagnosis and survival. Before COVID-19, Wales was experiencing significant gaps in the diagnostic and cancer workforce, such as in imaging, endoscopy, pathology, and non-surgical oncology, severely affecting its ability to diagnose cancers early, provide the most effective cancer treatment, and improve cancer survival. Coping with the backlog of patients caused by the pandemic will require additional capacity in cancer and diagnostic services to manage the increased demand. The existing gaps in the workforce will only get worse unless addressed. Approximately 30% of consultant histopathologist posts are vacant,^{vi} while 11% of endoscopy nurse posts are unfilled.^{vii}

The next Welsh Government should commit to a specific cancer workforce plan that can address gaps across the whole workforce, which are preventing transformation of cancer services. This should not only include increased recruitment and training, but also look at developing a skills mix approach, where existing staff can be used most effectively and free up consultant time.

Prevent cancers by achieving a smoke-free Wales

Smoking tobacco is the biggest preventable cause of cancer in Wales. Four in ten cancers in Wales are preventable. Currently, 17% of Welsh adults smoke but this increases to 21% in the most deprived areas of Wales^{viii}. Smoking tobacco is responsible for around 3,000 cases of cancer in Wales each year^{ix}.

Other UK nations have set a target date where they aim to be smoke free (less than 5% smoking prevalence). Our projections have shown that Wales is due to reach 5% smoking prevalence by 2037. By increasing the pace by just 40%, Wales could be smoke-free by 2030. If Wales achieved this, there would be 220,000 fewer smokers^x, preventing many cancers every year.

The next Welsh Government must set a 2030 smoke-free target, and a new, broad-ranging and ambitious tobacco control strategy to achieve this. This should include a commitment to introduce new models of smoking cessation in hospitals, and fully funding Help Me Quit and mass media campaigns to discourage uptake.

Target junk food to tackle obesity

Overweight and obesity is the second biggest preventable cause of cancer in Wales after smoking. Over 1,000 cancer cases are caused by being overweight or obese in Wales annually.^{xi} Limited progress has been made in efforts to reduce the rates of overweight and obesity in Wales' adult population (currently 36%^{xii} and 25%^{xiii} respectively).

The Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales strategy, launched in 2019, was a positive move to addressing obesity. The next step is to implement this to change Wales's obesogenic food environment towards better public health. Introducing legislations and guidelines will help to promote healthier choices and reduce the prevalence of excess weight, which is linked to 13 types of cancer.

The next Welsh Government should implement the Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales strategy at pace, prioritising the introduction of new legislation to restrict price promotions on junk foods which are high in fat, sugar in salt, and empower local authorities to use planning powers to restrict the setting up of new hot food takeaways near schools.

About Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK is the world's largest independent cancer charity dedicated to saving lives through research. Our ambition is to see 3 in 4 patients surviving their cancer by 2034. We support research into all aspects of cancer through the work of over 4,000 scientists, doctors and nurses. In 2019/20, we invested £4 million in research in Wales. In recent years, we have funded health marketing campaigns in Wales on both bowel screening and the signs and symptoms of lung cancer. Our Facilitator Programme supports primary care in three Local Health Boards to improve referrals of suspected cancer, as well as supporting cancer screening.

References

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