



Rt. Hon. Sajid Javid MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
SW1H 0EU

Wednesday 26th January 2021

Dear Secretary of State,

We are writing to share our concerns about the COVID-induced cancer backlog and to ask you to urgently meet with the undersigned cross-party group of parliamentarians and cancer experts to address it. In particular, we seek to highlight the need for urgent ringfenced investment and a radical new cancer recovery plan.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on our health service and created significant backlogs. But it is the cancer backlog that makes for the deadliest timebomb of unnecessary deaths. Recent figures released by the National Audit Office suggest there could be as many as 60,000 patients in England in the cancer backlog, with 750,000 fewer cancer referrals. These cancer patients are “missing” and likely do not know they have cancer.

There are also regional problems with record-high cancer waiting times. And this is all before the additional patients have presented to the NHS. The cancer backlog has worsened each month and the situation risks becoming unrecoverable. Frontline staff are already reporting a rapid increase in more advanced and incurable cancer, and now more cancelled cancer appointments and oncology staff redeployment again. Action is vital to prevent tens of thousands of additional unnecessary cancer deaths. If ever there was a time to work cross-party on a new cancer plan and urgently boost cancer care, it is now.

Cancer will not wait. International research shows that for every four weeks of delay in treatment, survival rates drop by 10%. The national recovery plan must boost the cancer workforce and cancer treatment capacity. The new and welcome investment in diagnosis is important, but unless we deliver a parallel investment in treatment, we will never catch up. If our investment in recovery only boosts diagnosis, we will only have succeeded in identifying the extra cancer patients without the means to cure them.

Our cancer summit in the summer provided many cost-effective solutions to many areas of the cancer pathway. In particular, technology-based solutions like radiotherapy cancer treatment must be urgently funded. Radiotherapy is internationally recognised as the closest thing we have to a "silver bullet" to COVID-proof cancer care. It plays a part in 4 out of every 10 cancer cures and will be needed by 1 in 4 of us at some point in our lives. A significant number of the 60,000 people currently caught in the cancer backlog will need radiotherapy.

However, radiotherapy has been overlooked under existing plans to tackle the backlog. It only receives 5% of the cancer budget, compared to 11% in other high-income countries. As a result, half of trusts are using equipment over the ten-year recommended expiration date and the service is on its knees. Frontline staff report long eight week waits and equipment left idle because of underfunding, sub-optimal commissioning and a lack of workforce.

A modest investment of £850m over three years for radiotherapy would deliver a significant benefit for cancer patients., but the way NHS budgets flow mean that this readily available COVID backlog busting solution is not being funded. In short, radiotherapy stands as the perfect example of why a radical new cancer plan is vital to tackle the cancer backlog.

There is an opportunity to rectify this in the upcoming elective recovery plan. By funding solutions offered by frontline cancer staff we can make significant progress tackling the backlog and save lives. The COVID induced cancer backlog is a very real and present danger that, without urgent action, will result in thousands of unnecessary deaths.

We urge you to meet with our delegation at the earliest opportunity to discuss the issue in more detail and work together on solutions.

Yours sincerely,

Tim Farron MP

Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Radiotherapy

Grahame Morris MP

Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Radiotherapy



Alan Brown MP

Allan Dorans MP

Andrew Gwynne MP

Bob Blackman MP

Carla Lockhart MP

Caroline Lucas MP

Catherine McKinnell MP

Derek Twigg MP

Emma Lewell Buck MP

Ian Lavery MP

Jamie Stone MP

Jason McCartney MP

Kate Osamor MP

Kim Johnson MP

Kim Leadbeater MP

Layla Moran MP

Margaret Greenwood MP

Munira Wilson MP

Paula Barker MP

Peter Dowd MP

Rosie Cooper MP

Rt Hon Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP

Sarah Green MP

Sir George Howarth MP

Stephen Timms MP

Wendy Chamberlain MP

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Lord McNally

Baroness Meacher

Lord Rana

Lord Rennard

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick

Lord Rooker

Baroness Thornhill

Baroness Verma

Lord Warner

Lord Wigley