

Consultation: Solutions to the COVID induced cancer backlog

Organisation: Cancer Awareness for Teens & Twenties (CATTs)

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About CATTs:

We want a future for all young people, aged 15-29, across the UK to have access to essential health education and practical support, so cancer can be detected earlier.

We work to give every young person access to vital health education, to allow them to be empowered to know their own bodies and to feel confident communicating health worries. We do this by working with young people and providing interactive workshops that cover a multitude of topics concerning their health. Our work will always be supported by communities we serve and what they want, and need will come above everything else. This will ensure every young person feels heard through our work and by the people that need to hear them.

Evidence on Terms of Reference:

Are there any opportunities to tackle the cancer backlog being missed?

The COVID-induced cancer backlog will have a devastating and knock-on impact on cancer diagnoses and services well into the future. As a youth-led charity, young people are often left out of the conversation. From our expertise in the field, we understand **two** ways in which they would benefit from being targeted with public health messaging and mass innovation.

The first opportunity is to improve early diagnosis for young people with cancer.

Pre-COVID, young people under 30 were often diagnosed with cancer after multiple presentations at Primary Care. According to a study by Teenage Cancer Trust in 2015, close to a third of young cancer patients were diagnosed after their health deteriorated significantly to the point that they are admitted to A&E.

We understand that there are many multifaceted reasons for this, such as young people not knowing their signs and/or symptoms were anything to worry about, combined with this age group experiencing barriers when accessing healthcare. These barriers are highlighted in a cross-sectional study, 'Cancer awareness among adolescents in Britain', this includes:

- Being worried about what a doctor might find and embarrassed and/or scared
- Not feeling confident to talk about signs and/or symptoms
- Difficulty talking to a doctor more generally
- Being too busy
- Difficulty making an appointment
- Difficulty arranging transport
- Worried about wasting their time



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At CATTs, we're worried that such instances of late diagnosis have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. During the first wave of COVID-19 half of people with reported cancer symptoms didn't contact their GP, with 59% not seeking help after noticing changes to a mole and 41% not seeking help for an unexplained lump or swelling.

Although cancer in young people is less common than in older adults, where most pandemic-centred research has been within, we expect the case to be mirrored, if not worse, due to the variety of additional barriers young people face in accessing healthcare and being less knowledgeable of the common signs and symptoms of cancer.

Prior to the pandemic, in 2017, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Teens and Young Adults with Cancer conducted an inquiry into existing research on young adult cancer, including experience with diagnosis and published their report "Listen Up! What Matters to Young Cancer Patients". In the report, of those surveyed, 73% of young people did not think enough was being done to improve the experience of early diagnosis, and 56% suggested better training for GPs on cancer in young people would be the single biggest improvement to experiences of diagnosis.

We cannot ignore the difficulty of diagnosing cancer in this age group. The potentially 'vague' nature of symptoms combined with the rare cases that GPs see in their careers can create a challenge, yet there must be a mass shift, both publicly and within healthcare, from the school of thought that cancer can only happen to older people.

The opportunity to improve diagnostic timelines in young people can be achieved through a combined approach. Firstly, improve the knowledge of cancer detection in young people. Secondly, work to reduce barriers in their access to healthcare and increase their confidence in communicating their worries with healthcare professionals, and thirdly, increase training and information access to GPs on cancer in young people.

Young people with cancer face significant setbacks in their lives during a time that should be full of opportunity and experience. We must ensure that the challenge of obtaining a timely diagnosis does not present another setback for these young people. Therefore, early diagnosis in this age group must be a priority when tackling the COVID-induced cancer backlog.

Our second recommendation is to educate people on cancer from a young age to aid early diagnosis in the long-term. Young people under 30 are in a particularly transitional stage of their life, defined by the development of health behaviours that can last a life-course. We firmly believe that by educating young people on prevention, detection and health empowerment from a young age is a vital and often missed opportunity to reduce the future cancer burden.



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What technological or innovative solutions might be implemented long and short term to tackle the cancer crisis?

The UK's 'cancer burden' is weighing heavier, and by 2035 the number of new cancer cases is projected to rise to over half a million each year with almost half of cancers currently being diagnosed at a late stage in England. In the aging adult population, late diagnosis is a major factor contributing to poor cancer survival rates in the UK with cancer currently causing one in four of all deaths in this country.

As a long-term solution, mass youth education will ensure generations of young people will grow older with increased awareness of cancer and in the hope that this work can be part of the solution to diagnose more cancers earlier and improve survival.

CATTs are the only UK charity dedicated to cancer awareness in young people. Our expertise began as a university society ran by medical students. Now we're a youth-led charity with a national footprint working with students, pupils, workplaces, nurses and youth clubs to turn the tables for young people's health education through our engaging workshop schemes. We implore the government and local authorities to work with us to make this mass education a reality.

What policy recommendations should the APPGs make to the Government for tackling the COVID-induced cancer crisis?

To tackle the COVID-induced cancer crisis, the APPG must recommend the Government to:

- Ensure each local authority includes young people in their cancer recovery strategy
- Ensure training and information is available to GPs and other healthcare professionals so cancer in young people is detected and diagnosed earlier
- Ensure funding is available to support mass education on cancer prevention, detection and health empowerment to protect young people's futures

Anything else you would like to say?

Too many young people with cancer we speak to have been continually turned away by healthcare professionals before their diagnosis and left with the long-term detrimental impact of a late diagnosis. Young people also have significantly low awareness of cancer, its symptoms, prevention and advocacy in healthcare settings; this must change. Young people should not be left out of the conversation.