

PE2193/A: Address dangerous delays in paediatric cancer diagnostics

Scottish Government written submission, 10 November 2025

Does the Scottish Government consider the specific ask[s] of the petition to be practical or achievable? If not, please explain why.

Every year in Scotland, approximately 180 children and up to 200 teenagers and young adults are diagnosed with cancer. Statistically, an individual GP in Scotland might see only one new cancer in a child under 15 years in a 35-year career.

If a clinician suspects cancer in children or a young person, then an urgent suspicion of cancer referral should be made to secondary care following the Scottish Referral Guidelines (SRG) for Suspected Cancer. The SRG have been updated to support GPs in referrals for children and young people, published on 6 August 2025. These guidelines have been specifically developed to support primary care clinicians to identify those with symptoms suspicious of cancer and identify those who require urgent assessment by a specialist.

The Information Services Division (Scotland) of NHS NSS (ISD) last reviewed all statistical waiting times publications in 2011 (the functions of ISD relevant to this submission are now undertaken by Public Health Scotland). This consultation process involved ISD, the Scottish Government and data providers to consider the user need and frequency of a suite of waiting times publications.

The clinically agreed decision made at that time was that the Acute Leukaemia and Paediatric Cancers statistics would no longer be published by ISD. There was clinical consensus that children with cancer symptoms should be treated as quickly as possible and it would therefore not be appropriate to subject these urgent cases to a longer 62-day target. The 62-day standard therefore applies to adults over the age of 16.

The Cancer Action Plan for Scotland 2023-2026 commits to 'carrying out a clinically led review of latest data and evidence to determine whether there is merit in specific additional or alternative cancer waiting times standards for different types of cancer and cancer treatment'.

A project steering group is being established via the Centre for Sustainable Delivery (CfSD) which will support this review, determining if any amendments to the standards would enhance patient experience and meet the needs of the NHS for the future.

In light of the publication of the Scottish Referral Guidelines and the upcoming review of the cancer waiting times standards, the Scottish Government is of the view that acting on the specific asks of the petition would be inappropriate at this time.

What, if any, action the Scottish Government is currently taking to address the issues raised by this petition, and is any further action being considered that will achieve the ask[s] of this petition?

Whilst Scottish Ministers are responsible for determining the strategic policy of the NHS in Scotland, it is NHS Boards and healthcare professionals locally who have responsibility for service delivery and patient treatment.

The Scottish Government expects the Managed Service Network for Children and Young People to maintain a constant watch for systemic failures and to initiate local board escalation procedures it is deemed necessary to do so.

The Scottish Referral Guidelines (SRG) for Suspected Cancer support primary care clinicians to identify those with symptoms suspicious of cancer and identify those who require urgent assessment by a specialist, this includes specific guidelines for children and young people. A full clinical review of SRGs has already been completed with updated guidance published on 6 August 2025. Fourteen peer review sessions have taken place over the course of this work to ensure engagement, evidence, and input from key stakeholders such as the Scottish Primary Care Cancer Group, Healthcare Improvement Scotland, secondary care clinicians and the Scottish Cancer Coalition.

A new primary care cancer education platform – Gateway C – was launched in 2024 in NHS Scotland, funded by the Detect Cancer Earlier (DCE) Programme and supported by NHS Education for Scotland (NES).

Gateway C provides innovative and tailored information to support earlier cancer diagnosis efforts and enable effective decision-making. This free online platform is accessible to all primary care clinicians including pharmacists, dentists, and optometrists.

Further to this, the Managed Clinical Network for Children and Young People is taking action to develop further education and learning opportunities to improve referrals and ensure timely diagnosis for young people. These would support healthcare professionals who are less familiar with the unique needs of young people, as they navigate through healthcare pathways.

The Managed Clinical Network for Children and Young People is also supporting arrangements between the Principal Treatment Centres and Shared Care Centres across Scotland, to provide education and advice to assist staff on the management of patients and to identify early diagnosis.

Action 42 of the 3-year Cancer Action Plan commits to ‘carrying out a clinically led review of latest data and evidence to determine whether there is merit in specific additional or alternative cancer waiting times standards for different types of cancer and cancer treatment’. The review will require significant clinical leadership, with appropriate engagement across a range of stakeholders.

A project steering group is being established which will support the review, determining if any amendments to the standards would enhance patient experience and meet the needs of the NHS for the future. The scope of this review can include paediatric cancer.

The Scottish Government will continue to keep new clinical advice and evidence under review.

Healthcare Quality and Improvement Division, Scottish Government