Cancer Research UK Scotland

4th November 2026

Briefing for the Scottish Parliament Health, Care and Sport Committee

Pre-Budget Scrutiny: Preparing for Future Challenges in Health and Care

Cancer must be a pre-budget priority

Cancer is the leading cause of death in Scotland and nearly one in two people will be diagnosed with cancer during their lifetime. Scotland faces a growing cancer challenge, with the number of new cancer cases projected to increase by 16% by 2038-40, reaching around 42,100 diagnoses each year.

Cancer is also one of Scotland's starkest inequalities challenges. Cancer death rates are around 80% higher for people living in the most deprived areas of Scotland compared with the least deprived. Around 4,300 cancer deaths each year are associated with deprivation, equating to around 12 avoidable deaths every day.

Alongside the devastating human impact, cancer carries a substantial economic cost. Around 30,000 productive years of life were lost to cancer in Scotland in 2023, with the present value of future lost productivity estimated at around £840 million. Investing in cancer prevention, earlier diagnosis, treatment and research can save and improve lives, benefit the NHS, improve productivity and strengthen Scotland's economy.

Cancer Research UK is calling on the Scottish Government to make a national commitment to reduce the cancer death rate by 15% by 2040, preventing around 10,100 cancer deaths. Helping to achieve this ambition will require sustained investment and leadership across four key priorities.

Recommendation 1: Fund and deliver the 10-year cancer strategy and meet cancer waiting times

Cancer Research UK welcomed publication of the Cancer Strategy for Scotland 2023 to 2033, which sets out a bold vision for improving cancer outcomes and reducing inequalities. However, successful delivery will depend upon sustained investment and implementation.

As cancer cases continue to rise, Scotland must ensure that delivery of the Cancer Strategy and future 3-year Cancer Action Plans keep pace with demand and remain focused on improving outcomes for patients.

Scotland is also entering a period of significant health and care reform. These reforms present an important opportunity to improve cancer prevention, diagnosis, treatment and innovation across the health system. As services are redesigned, Cancer Research UK believes it is essential that cancer remains at the forefront of decision-making. Given cancer is Scotland's leading cause of death and demand is projected to continue rising, reforms should be assessed against their potential to improve cancer outcomes, reduce inequalities and support delivery of the Cancer Strategy.

Meeting cancer waiting times standards is a critical part of delivering better outcomes. Recent performance data continue to show significant challenges in achieving national standards.

Why this matters

Effective delivery of the Cancer Strategy can:

- Improve cancer survival and patient experience.
- Reduce inequalities in outcomes.
- Help ensure NHS services are equipped to meet growing demand.
- Contribute towards preventing 10,100 cancer deaths by 2040.

Questions for the Cabinet Secretary

- How will the 2027-28 Budget support delivery of the Cancer Strategy for Scotland 2023 to 2033 and the next 3-year Cancer Action Plan that is due to be published in the coming months?
- Is the Scottish Government confident that current levels of investment are sufficient to deliver the Strategy's ambitions?
- What actions and resources are required to restore sustained progress towards Scotland's cancer waiting times standards?
- What measures will the Scottish Government use to assess progress towards reducing Scotland's cancer death rate by 15% by 2040?

Recommendation 2: Strengthen NHS capacity and innovation to meet patient need

A well-resourced NHS is essential to diagnosing and treating cancer as early and effectively as possible.

Scotland is facing increasing demand for cancer services as the number of cancer diagnoses continues to rise. At the same time, the NHS must be supported with sufficient workforce capacity, modern diagnostic infrastructure and access to innovative technologies and treatments.

Cancer Research UK believes that investment in NHS capacity and innovation must be a key component of future budget decisions if Scotland is to improve cancer outcomes and keep pace with growing demand.

The Scottish Government's programme of NHS reform creates an opportunity to build more integrated, preventative and sustainable services. Cancer should be a core consideration within these reforms. Decisions on workforce planning, diagnostic capacity, service redesign, digital transformation and innovation adoption will have a direct impact on whether Scotland can meet rising demand for cancer services and improve outcomes for patients.

Why this matters

Strengthening NHS capacity can:

- Support earlier diagnosis and treatment.
- Improve outcomes and survival.
- Enable wider use of innovative tests, treatments and technologies.
- Help ensure services remain sustainable as cancer incidence increases.

Questions for the Cabinet Secretary

- Given cancer incidence is projected to continue rising, how will the Scottish Government ensure NHS cancer services have the capacity to meet future demand?
- What additional investment is planned to support workforce capacity across cancer services?
- How will the Budget support increased diagnostic capacity and adoption of innovative tests and treatments?

- What progress is being made to ensure patients can benefit equitably from innovation across Scotland?
- As NHS services are reformed and redesigned, how is the Scottish Government ensuring that improving cancer outcomes and reducing cancer inequalities are embedded within its approach to health service reform?

Recommendation 3: Combat lung cancer - the biggest cancer killer in Scotland

Lung cancer remains the biggest cancer killer in Scotland and tackling it represents one of the greatest opportunities to improve cancer outcomes and reduce inequalities.

Tobacco is the biggest cause of lung cancer. Full implementation of the Tobacco and Vapes Act, sustained investment in stop smoking services and the rollout of a national lung cancer screening programme all have an important role to play in reducing the burden of lung cancer.

Action on lung cancer is also essential if Scotland is to narrow the substantial inequalities in cancer outcomes that exist between the most and least deprived communities.

Why this matters

Action on lung cancer can:

- Prevent cancers before they occur.
- Improve early diagnosis and survival.
- Reduce pressure on NHS services.
- Reduce health inequalities.
- Improve economic participation and productivity.

Questions for the Cabinet Secretary

- How will the Scottish Government ensure full and timely implementation of the Tobacco and Vapes Act in Scotland?
- What funding will be available for equitably available stop smoking services and wider tobacco control activity?

- What progress has been made towards implementing a national lung cancer screening programme in Scotland, and will smoking cessation services embedded within it?

Recommendation 4: Create a world-leading cancer research environment

Scotland has a strong international reputation for cancer research and innovation. Research is vital to delivering better prevention, earlier diagnosis and more effective treatments for people affected by cancer.

Research also supports economic growth through high-value jobs, inward investment and innovation. Creating a world-leading cancer research environment will help ensure Scotland remains at the forefront of scientific discovery while delivering tangible benefits for patients and the economy.

Cancer Research UK's manifesto calls on the Scottish Government to support plans for a Scottish Health and Biomedicine Institute (SHBI) and strengthen Scotland's position as a leading destination for cancer research and life sciences investment.

Why this matters

Investment in research can:

- Improve outcomes for people affected by cancer.
- Accelerate access to new treatments and technologies.
- Attract inward investment and external funding.
- Support highly skilled jobs and economic growth.

Questions for the Cabinet Secretary

- How is NHS Scotland being supported to participate in more cancer research and clinical trials so that patients across Scotland can benefit from the latest advances in prevention, diagnosis and treatment?

- As NHS services are reformed, how is the Scottish Government ensuring that research and innovation are embedded within service redesign so that people affected by cancer can benefit more quickly from new discoveries and technologies?

Conclusion

Cancer is one of the defining health, economic and inequalities challenges facing Scotland. Without more action, rising cancer incidence and persistent inequalities will continue to impact patients, families, NHS services and the economy.

As the Committee undertakes pre-budget scrutiny, Cancer Research UK encourages members to explore how the Scottish Government will:

1. Fund and deliver the 10-year cancer strategy and meet cancer waiting times
2. Strengthen NHS capacity and innovation to meet patient need
3. Combat lung cancer - the biggest cancer killer in Scotland
4. Create a world-leading cancer research environment

Taken together, these actions can help Scotland achieve the ambition of reducing cancer deaths by 15% by 2040, preventing around 10,100 deaths while supporting a healthier population, a more sustainable NHS and a stronger economy.