

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

17th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday
22 November 2023

PE2045: Lower the cervical cancer smear test age in Scotland to 16

Petitioner	Tiffany Maguire
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to lower the standard cervical cancer smear test age to 16.
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2045

Introduction

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 5 September 2023.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 28 signatures have been received on this petition.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered. A response has been received from the Scottish Government and is included at **Annexe C** of this paper.

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE2045: Lower the cervical cancer smear test age in Scotland to 16

Petitioner

Tiffany Maguire

Date Lodged:

05/09/23

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to lower the standard cervical cancer smear test age to 16.

Previous action

I have contacted Fulton MacGregor MSP and Meghan Gallagher MSP by email.

Background information

I have researched cervical cancer smear testing and I have come to the conclusion that something needs to be done to reduce the standard age at which women are first offered these tests to 16. The rise of young women being refused smear tests until they reach the age of 26 or until after they develop abnormal cells (cervical intraepithelial neoplasia at level 1 or level 2: cin1 or cin2). I believe that all smear tests should be given to every woman when they reach 16.

I am a mum of three at the age of 27 and I was refused a smear when I had my first child nine years ago. My children were all premature and nothing was done to understand why. I had my first smear at 26 to be told that I have cin2. The treatment didn't work and now I am waiting on a plan for my next steps.

I want to make sure that no other young woman goes through what I have gone through over the past nine years.

Annexe B

SPICe

The Information Centre
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE2045](#): “Lower the cervical cancer smear test age in Scotland to 16”, lodged by Tiffany Maguire

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

[PE2045](#) calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to lower the cervical screening test age to 16. The petitioner underwent her first cervical screening test at age 26 and was found to have Grade 2 [cervical intraepithelial neoplasia](#) (CIN2) cell abnormalities in her cervix. Her treatment has so far been unsuccessful. The petitioner expressed that had her request for a cervical screening test following the birth of her children been granted, the cell abnormalities may have been discovered earlier.

Current cervical screening provision

Cervical screening is currently [routinely offered in Scotland](#) on a five-yearly basis between the ages of 25 and 64. In Scotland, Wales, and England, [HPV primary screening](#) is used to test the sample taken from a patient’s cervix. The test screens for the presence of the human papilloma virus (HPV) in the cervix, as the virus [causes 99.8% of cervical cancers](#).

The sample is first tested for high-risk HPV, as this form of the virus can cause cervical cell changes that may lead to cervical cancer over time. If high-risk HPV is detected, the same sample will be tested for cell changes. If HPV and/or cell changes are detected, patients will be offered [further testing and treatment](#) as clinically appropriate. The [presence of cell abnormalities](#) does not mean that a patient has cervical

cancer; however, some types of cell abnormalities [indicate an increased risk](#) of developing cervical cancer in the future.

Potential implications of lowering minimum age for cervical screening test

Cervical cancer is rare in under-25s, representing [less than 1% of cases](#). The [incidence rates of cervical cancer](#) rise sharply from age 25-29, and peak in the 30-34 age group. As Cancer Research UK notes, this pattern reflects the diagnosis of prevalent cases at initial routine screening, the prevention of a high proportion of incident cases during subsequent screenings, and the likely peak of HPV exposure in early adulthood.

Cervical screening programs [commonly begin at age 25](#) in many countries, including the UK, France, Germany, and Australia. The [European Union guidelines](#) advise commencing cervical screening at age 30, and the [World Health Organisation recommends](#) that cervical screening begins by age 35.

Organisations including [Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust](#) advise that the risks of conducting cervical screening tests for under-25s may outweigh the benefits, as it is common for those in this age group to experience changes in the cells of the cervix which resolve by themselves. If these changes were detected by a cervical screening test, the patient may be offered unnecessary treatment which could lead to complications, including an increased risk of premature birth in future pregnancies.

Though cervical cancer is rare in under-25s, [Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust](#) promotes awareness of [the symptoms of cervical cancer](#) among all age groups. Anyone experiencing these symptoms, regardless of age, is encouraged to contact their GP. NHS Scotland's [cancer referral guidelines](#) state that a patient with "clinical features (vaginal discharge, postmenopausal, postcoital or persistent intermenstrual bleeding) and abnormality suggestive of cervical cancer on examination of the cervix" should be urgently referred for cancer investigation.

It is anticipated that cervical cancer incidence rates in younger age groups will [decrease in the coming years](#), due to the introduction of [the HPV vaccine](#). The HPV vaccine [has been routinely offered](#) to S1 pupils in Scotland since 2008, which means that the first cohort of pupils who were offered the vaccine are now over the age of 25. [Public Health Scotland reported](#) that the vaccine has reduced the rate of cancer-causing HPV by 90%. However, vaccination [does not protect against all subtypes of HPV](#), and vaccinated people who are eligible for cervical

screening are therefore still advised to attend appointments. The [World Health Organisation recommends](#) that vaccination and screening are used together as part of a comprehensive approach to cervical cancer control.

Scottish Government actions

Gail Ross MSP lodged [written question S5W-21676](#) on 14 February 2019, asking the Scottish Government in what circumstances a woman aged (a) under 25 and (b) over 65 can request an NHS smear test. The then-Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing, Joe FitzPatrick MSP, replied that women outwith the cervical screening age range cannot self-refer for a cervical screening test, as the evidence suggests that the risks outweigh any potential benefits. The Minister clarified that the cervical screening test is not a test for cancer, and that if a patient presents with symptoms of cervical cancer, they should be referred for diagnostic testing regardless of age.

Scottish Parliament actions

There has been no Scottish Parliament action on this topic to date.

UK Parliament actions

A [petition was lodged](#) with the UK Parliament regarding the lowering of the cervical screening age to 16 in 2020. The UK Government's response to the petition stated that the current minimum age of 25 reflects the evidence that conducting cervical screening before the age of 25 can do more harm than good, and encouraged awareness of the symptoms of cervical cancer at all ages. The petition was closed in February 2021.

Sarah Swift
Researcher

27 September 2023

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

Annexe C

Scottish Government submission of 3 October 2023

PE2045/A: Lower the cervical cancer smear test age in Scotland to 16

The Scottish Government, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, relies on advice about screening programmes from the UK National Screening Committee (UK NSC), an independent expert advisory group. They advise the Scottish Government that, within the criteria for a population screening programme, the benefit gained by individuals from the screening programme should outweigh any harms, for example from overdiagnosis, overtreatment, false positives, false reassurance, uncertain findings and complications.

Following this guidance, women under the age of 25 are not invited for routine cervical screening as the evidence shows that screening would do more harm than good. For example, cervical cancer is extremely rare in women under 25, despite cervical abnormalities being quite common. Repeated treatments for cervical abnormalities can increase the chance of premature births if a woman goes on to become pregnant.

The UK NSC is due to complete their next review of cervical screening, although we do not anticipate any changes to the current age thresholds. More information can be found at [Cervical cancer - UK National Screening Committee \(UK NSC\) - GOV.UK \(view-health-screening-recommendations.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/view-health-screening-recommendations.service.gov.uk)

Thank you again for raising these concerns with the Scottish Government. I hope that you find this response helpful.