

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition PE2088 – Help eliminate cervical cancer through improved and at-home HPV testing

Background

The petition is calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to help eliminate cervical cancer by introducing at-home HPV (human papillomavirus) self-sampling.

In 2020, 266 women were diagnosed with cervical cancer in Scotland.¹ This was a 24% reduction from the previous year when there were 350 cases.

The [Cancer incidence report from Public Health Scotland](#) notes that there was a drop (-45%) in the early detection of cervical cancers in 2020, most likely due to the pause in screening services during the pandemic.

The [most recent statistics](#) show that the proportion of those who are up to date with their cervical screening tests was 68.7%. This was down by 0.7% on the previous year.

Women from deprived areas are less likely to participate in screening (62.4%) compared to those from the least deprived areas (73.1%).

Since March 2020, the screening process was changed to include an initial screening test for HPV. Instead of all smear tests being tested in cytology (i.e. cells being viewed through a microscope), only those which have tested positive for HPV will be viewed. This change was introduced because of the link between cervical cancer and HPV. Cervical cancer is the most common HPV-linked cancer and 99% of cases are believed to be caused by HPV.

This link is not only recognised in the changes to the screening programme, but also in the commencement of the HPV vaccination programme in 2008. All young people in Scotland are now offered a vaccination in the first year of secondary school.

[Coverage of the vaccine in 2022/23](#) for S1 pupils was 76.3% for girls and 69.7% for boys.

¹ https://publichealthscotland.scot/media/12498/i_cancer_female_genital_organ.xls

The Petition

The petition is calling for the introduction of self-sampling for HPV. This would involve women taking a test at home and returning the sample in the post for testing. Anyone with a positive test would then be invited for a traditional smear test.

Self-testing is seen as a way of getting around some of the barriers to smear testing, such as embarrassment, fear, cultural barriers and appointment availability. This is an approach that has been trialled in some areas of England and in [Dumfries & Galloway](#).

Other countries, such as the Netherlands and Australia, already provide self-testing and have reported positive results in screening uptake and early detection of cervical cancer.

Screening programmes are guided by advice and recommendations of the National Screening Committee (NSC). This is a UK expert advisory group which provides advice to all four UK nations.

The NSC is expected to make a recommendation on cervical self-sampling later this year.

Scottish Government Action

The Scottish Government published the [Women's Health Plan](#) in August 2021. This included a commitment to focus improvement activity in screening, including self-sampling in the cervical cancer screening programme.

The Scottish Government has also established the Cervical Cancer Elimination Expert Group to take forward the [World Health Organisation's target of eliminating cervical cancer](#).

An [Equity in Screening Strategy 2023-26](#) was also published in 2023 and aims to tackle inequalities within screening programmes. This strategy highlights [a systematic review](#) which found strong evidence to support self-testing for HPV in those who do not respond to a cervical screening appointment in primary care.

Scottish Parliament Action

There was a [debate on cervical cancer prevention week](#) in February 2023. There have also been several parliamentary questions on the topic, including on the potential roll-out of self-sampling (see PQ [S6W-26578](#)).

In response to this question, the Minister stated:

“The Scottish Government recognises the potential of cervical self-sampling to improve uptake of cervical screening. In Scotland, a working group has been established to consider potential models to understand any changes that would be required to the screening

programme to support an initial roll-out. This work will be influenced by the on-going work of the UK NSC and emerging global research.”

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29 May 2024

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

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Published by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), an office of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP