

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition PE2104 – End the pause on prescribing puberty blockers to children in Scotland

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ask the relevant health boards to reassess the decision to pause the prescription of puberty hormone suppressants and gender affirming hormones for children and young people with gender dysphoria in Scotland, and ensure that it is still possible to provide new prescriptions while a review of the decision takes place.

Background

In 2020, concerns were raised about practices at the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) at the Tavistock clinic in London. GIDS provided care to children and young people experiencing gender dysphoria and/or incongruence.

In light of these concerns, NHS England commissioned a review of gender services for young people and appointed Dr Hilary Cass as the Chair.

The [final report of the Cass review](#) was published on 10 April 2024 and made 32 recommendations. Among these was its findings and recommendations in relation to hormone treatment, including treatments commonly known as ‘puberty blockers’.

Puberty blockers refer to Gonadotrophin-Releasing Hormone Analogues (GnRH) which work by suppressing the production of sex-hormones.

When used in the treatment of gender dysphoria and/or incongruence they are used to delay the physical changes associated with puberty, such as breast development or facial hair growth.

One of the rationales given for their use is that they allow children experiencing gender dysphoria more time to explore their gender identity without the added stress that physical changes may cause.

Gender affirming hormones on the other hand, are used to help align an individuals’ physical appearance with their gender identity. Testosterone is prescribed to transgender males (female to male) and oestrogen to transgender females (male to female).

Addressing service users directly, Dr Cass said:

“I have been disappointed by the lack of evidence on the long-term impact of taking hormones from an early age; research has let us all down, most importantly you. However, we cannot expect you to make life-changing decisions in a vacuum without being able to weigh their risks and benefits now and in the long-term, and we have to build the evidence base with good studies going forward.”

In the weeks leading up to the publication of the final report, NHS England had already announced that puberty blockers would no longer be routinely prescribed in England, other than in exceptional circumstances or as part of a research trial.

It was subsequently announced that the Sandyford clinic in Glasgow – which runs Scotland’s only gender identity clinic for young people – would follow suit and put a ‘pause’ on new referrals to paediatric endocrinology for the consideration of hormone treatment in under 18s. This pause was for both puberty blockers and gender-affirming hormones. Paediatric endocrinology is based at the children and young people’s hospitals in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Hormone treatments are now only available to under 18s on the NHS for the treatment of gender dysphoria and/or incongruence if they were already being prescribed prior to the change in policy, or if they are being prescribed as part of a clinical trial.

Further to this, on 3 June 2024, the previous UK Government enacted emergency legislation¹ to ban the prescribing of puberty blockers for gender dysphoria and/or incongruence to under 18s. The ban does not apply to gender-affirming hormones but the Scottish policy of no new NHS referrals for under 18s still stands.

Although the NHS policy had already changed, the purpose of the legislation is to prevent people obtaining puberty blockers from private prescribers.

Legislation on the regulation of medicines is reserved to Westminster. The legislation therefore applies to England, Wales and Scotland and is in force until 26 November 2024 (extended from the original expiry date of the 3 September 2024)².

The legislation was challenged in court by TransActual UK, but on 29 July 2024, [the High Court ruled the ban was lawful](#). TransActual UK has indicated it does not intend to appeal.

The new UK Health Secretary, Wes Streeting MP, has expressed his support for a continued ban and stressed the need for treatment to be evidence based. He has also committed to the plans for establishing a clinical study to gather the necessary evidence to inform future care and treatment.

¹ [The Medicines \(Gonadotrophin-Releasing Hormone Analogues\)\(Emergency Prohibition\)\(England, Wales and Scotland\) Order 2024 – 2024/727](#)

² [The Medicines \(Gonadotrophin-Releasing Hormone Analogues\) \(Emergency Prohibition\) \(Extension\) Order 2024 – 2024/868](#)

Scottish Government Action

The [Scottish Government issued its response to the Cass report on 5 July 2024](#). In correspondence with the Convener of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, the Chief Medical Officer said:

“We support the recommendation for rigorous clinical trials and have engaged with the Chief Scientist’s Office (CSO) and with colleagues in the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) and NHS England about Scotland’s participation in a multicentre trial of puberty-blocking hormones.”

The report also restated a continued pause on the use of gender-affirming hormones in under 18s.

On 3 September 2024, the Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health made a [statement to the Scottish Parliament on gender identity healthcare services](#). In the statement, the Minister stated that the Scottish Government accepted the Cass recommendations in full and that work was already underway to implement them. A [progress report](#) was published on the same day.

In relation to puberty blockers specifically, the Minister highlighted that the Scottish Government had confirmed to the UK Department for Health and Social Care, that an NHS Scotland team would be willing to join the National Institute for Health and Care Research UK-wide study on puberty blockers as a treatment for gender dysphoria.

Scottish Parliament Action

The Health, Social Care and Sport Committee held an [evidence session with Dr Cass on 7 May 2024](#).

The Committee is also due to hold follow-up sessions with the Chief Medical Officer and representatives of the Sandyford clinic in September and October 2024.

There was also [a debate held in the Chamber on 8 May 2024](#) on a motion in the name of Meghan Gallacher MSP.

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