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Bhoireannach
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Civil Justice Committee

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17 July 2024

Dear Karen,

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee findings on Scotland's HIV anti-stigma campaign and achieving zero transmissions by 2030

Thank you for your letter of 8 May 2024 setting out the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's findings following recent evidence sessions examining Scotland's HIV anti-stigma campaign and achieving zero new transmissions by 2030. I am grateful to you and members of the Committee for taking the time to explore these important issues with such commitment, rigour and sensitivity.

I was pleased that the evidence sessions and the Committee's findings highlighted the huge advances that have been made in the prevention and treatment of HIV, and recognise the outstanding and innovative work that is underway across the sector – including projects funded by the Scottish Government – to achieve our transmission elimination goal and improve the lives of people living with HIV. However, the evidence also highlighted the need to continue working on tackling stigma, and I can assure you that this is also something the Scottish Government is fully committed to.

Having carefully considered the Committee's findings and recommendations, I have set out the Scottish Government's response to these below.

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- 1. The Committee asks the Scottish Government to take urgent steps to address this [stigma] by developing comprehensive training programme for healthcare and public sector workers to include up to date information on HIV, dispelling common misconceptions and emphasising the importance of individual care and empathy.**
(Paragraph 52)

The Scottish Government continues to work in partnership with a range of stakeholders including NHS Boards, the third sector and academics to achieve the 2030 goal of zero new HIV transmissions in Scotland. This includes an ongoing commitment to challenging HIV-related stigma on a national basis and reducing barriers to HIV prevention interventions.

As part of our recently published HIV Transmission Elimination Delivery Plan, the Scottish Government has committed to developing a proposal to address educational needs across the Health and Social Care sector and other key public sector environments. Work is currently underway to develop a Workforce Education and Community Engagement project to progress this work, which will build on the national anti-stigma campaign whilst complementing other initiatives that have received funding through our Sexual Health and Blood Borne Virus Action Plan.

These include the Fast Track Cities initiative, led by Waverley Care, which aims to increase the meaningful involvement of people living with HIV (PLWHIV), decrease transmission of HIV in Scotland and reduce HIV stigma among the general public and health and social care workforce. Scottish Government funding currently supports the involvement of PLWHIV in community panels to inform interventions, identify barriers and find and implement solutions.

Funding has also been awarded to NHS National Education for Scotland to update materials and training for practitioners in non-HIV specialist roles. A specialist educator post has been funded by the Scottish Government to support the provision of training across Scotland. This work is currently underway and a scoping exercise is being undertaken to understand what educational resources are required across the health and social care workforce.

- 2. The Committee urges the Scottish Government to look at and fund innovative ways for rural communities to access care while maintaining privacy and anonymity.**
(Paragraph 53)

The Scottish Government continues to support a range of interventions to improve access to HIV prevention and testing. These include work to deliver a national online postal self-sampling STI and HIV testing service, which is currently being taken forward by Public Health Scotland. Work on this is currently underway. This will remove barriers to testing and ensure it is accessible, particularly for those in rural communities who do not have local access to specialist sexual health services. We also continue to support Terrence Higgins Trust Scotland's delivery of HIV Self-Test Scotland and community testing services.

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I am pleased that the Committee recognised the potential of the innovative ePrEP project funded by Scottish Government and led by Professor Claudia Escourt. As you are aware, the project will be piloting an innovative approach to HIV PrEP care which could help to make PrEP more accessible to patients in rural communities who are confidently managing their PrEP medication or who could access PrEP online with the support of a peer-supporter.

3. The Committee commends the Scottish Government and the Terrence Higgins Trust for the anti-stigma film and campaign. It asks the Scottish Government to consider building on this work with a broader, community focused public awareness campaign.

(Paragraph 54)

We are continuing to consider the most effective ways to build on the excellent work of the anti-stigma campaign. Evaluation of this work is still ongoing in order to identify the impact that this campaign had. The Workforce education project outlined above will build on this work as we continue to target stigma of a public level but also in specific organisations such as health and social care.

4. The Committee recommends that developments on HIV treatment should be incorporated into the school curriculum as part of broader sex education provision.

(Paragraph 55)

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring all children and young people receive high quality relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) education, which is an integral part of the health and wellbeing area of the curriculum.

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is the national approach to learning and teaching for young people aged 3 to 18 in Scotland and is underpinned by the values of wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity. The curriculum is not statutory and therefore it is for teachers, head teachers and other professional educational practitioners to decide the development and implementation of the curriculum within the overall framework. However, we are specific about the need for children and young people to gain knowledge appropriate to their age and stage of education.

RSHP education is intended to help children and young people build positive relationships as they grow older and should present facts in an objective, balanced and sensitive manner within the framework of curricular values and an awareness of the law on sexual behaviour. Teachers therefore have the flexibility to include content on HIV awareness / stigma if they feel it appropriate to the RSHP lesson.

There are many resources available to teachers to help them deliver meaningful RSHP learning and Education Scotland include a summary of these on their website at <https://education.gov.scot/resources/a-summary-of-rshp-resources/>. One of these resources, www.rshp.scot, was developed and published by a collaborative partnership of health boards and local authorities, to help improve delivery of the existing curriculum. It provides teachers

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with a valuable resource to support children and young people's learning and understanding in RSHP education. The resource provides teachers with factual information about sexual and reproductive health, in a non-judgemental manner, to enable children and young people to make informed decisions about their lives. In developing the resource, it was ensured learning outcomes remained age-appropriate in all Curriculum for Excellence levels. This resource contains a learning activity on the local and global impact of HIV at third / fourth level or S1 to S3. You can access the learning activity at <https://rshp.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Part-2.-Local-and-Global-Impact-of-HIV-Activity-plan-April-2020.pdf>.

- 5. The Committee acknowledges that it is too early to evaluate the impact or merit of the [emergency department] opt-out testing pilots and asks the Scottish Government to provide it with an update of its findings once these are known.** (Paragraph 78)

In addition to examining the local evaluation data from the three Scottish pilot projects, the results will be considered along with findings from England and other evidence, including Scottish Government-funded research examining missed opportunities for diagnosing HIV and BBVs, to determine whether emergency department opt-out testing is acceptable, deliverable and cost-effective in Scotland. I will be happy to provide an update to the Committee in due course.

- 6. The Scottish Government may need to conduct a cost-benefit analysis to optimise PrEP provision.** (Paragraph 92)
- 7. The Committee welcomes the development and work being undertaken with e-PrEP to increase accessibility and reach individuals who face barriers to traditional healthcare services. It asks the Scottish Government to provide an update to it as this work develops.** (Paragraph 93)

The Scottish Government has allocated funding to NHS Grampian and Aberdeenshire Health and Social Care Partnership to explore the feasibility and acceptability of HIV PrEP provision in primary care in the Northeast of Scotland. This project will be taken forward through 2023-25 with learning considered beyond the pilot. Work to explore the feasibility of provision within community pharmacy will also be considered during 2024-25. As outlined above the innovative ePrEP project funded by Scottish Government and led by Professor Claudia Escourt has potential to improve access to PrEP care, including for those who face barriers to current services.

We will continue to review the potential costs and benefits of this work in order to optimise PrEP provision and ensure access is improved, particularly for underserved populations, and I will also be happy to provide updates on this work as it progresses.

- 8. The Committee suggests the Scottish Government conduct a cost-benefit analysis and define clear goals as to what could be achieved [with an HIV**

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testing week]. If implemented, it should target high-risk populations with outcomes monitored for future reference.

(Paragraph 97)

Within the HIV Transmission Elimination Delivery Plan we have committed to reviewing the potential costs and benefits of a national HIV testing week once priority actions to expand capacity and improve access to testing have been progressed. I agree that it will be important to define clear goals about what this type of intervention could achieve, and this will form part of the review.

- 9. The Committee agrees this data is crucial to target interventions effectively. It welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to improving data collection and asks it to ensure steps are taken as soon as possible to address existing data gaps, improve accuracy of HIV data and expand the number of indicators shared with partners. It asks the Scottish Government to provide an update to Parliament as progress is made.**

(Paragraph 107)

Having access to robust data is central to our ability to track progress against deliverables and identify areas where intervention is required. As part of the recently published HIV Transmission Elimination Delivery Plan, Public Health Scotland (PHS) is preparing a monitoring and evaluation plan to track progress against our HIV transmission elimination goals. PHS is currently developing key indicators for monitoring progress in consultation with Scottish Government and other stakeholders. Once the monitoring plan is developed, identified gaps in surveillance will be addressed. I will be happy to provide an update to Parliament in due course.

Once again, I would like to thank you and the Committee for your attention to these important issues, and for the opportunity to provide evidence as part of your inquiry. I hope that this information is helpful, and will be happy to provide further updates in due course.

Yours sincerely,

Jenni Minto MSP

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