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Senedd Briefing:

Time for Targeted Lung Cancer Screening in Wales?



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In brief

In Wales more than 190 lives a year could be saved by diagnosing people with lung cancer before they have symptoms. Around 1800 people die every year from lung cancer, making it the biggest cause of cancer death in the country.

Lung cancer is not experienced equally across Wales. The disease is linked to socio-economic inequalities and takes a terrible toll on vulnerable communities.

Lung cancer is also regarded as one of six “Less Survivable Cancers” cancers of the lungs, liver, brain, oesophagus, pancreas and stomach. These have an average five-year survival rate of just 14%. Compared to other common cancers the less survivable cancers are as deadly as they were decades ago.

The UK National Screening Committee (UK NSC) recommended on the 29th September 2022 that targeted lung cancer screening should be offered to the high-risk group of people aged 55 to 74 years with a history of smoking.

Tenovus Cancer Care calls on the Welsh Government to:

- **Welcome the positive recommendation from the UK NSC concerning targeted lung cancer screening.**
- **Commit to delivering a sustainable targeted lung cancer screening programme that identifies lung cancers at an earlier stage.**
- **Endorse and support the Cwm Taf Morgannwg UHB Lung Health Check pilot.**
- **Direct Public Health Wales to work with partners and stakeholders in England and Wales to develop and sustain a targeted lung cancer screening programme for Wales that is integrated with smoking cessation services and optimised to tackle socio-economic barriers to take up.**
- **Support action to diagnose less survivable cancers earlier and faster; to ensure everyone receives the best care and treatment available; and for substantive research funding to close the gap on cancer inequalities.**

An Historic First

On the 29th September 2022 the UK NSC¹ recommended that the 4 UK nations should move towards implementing targeted national lung cancer screening programmes - integrated with smoking cessation services - for people at high risk.

This positive recommendation is the first time the UK NSC has made a targeted screening recommendation under an expanded remit allowing it to do so.

Targeted screening aims to identify people at a higher risk of a condition beyond broad population criteria such as age or sex. In this instance, the UK NSC recommended that targeted lung cancer screening should be offered to the high-risk group of people aged 55 to 74 years with a history of smoking.

On the 26th June 2023 the UK Government announced² the rollout of a targeted lung cancer screening programme across England. This follows a successful opening phase where approximately 70% of the screening took place in mobile units parked in convenient places - such as supermarket car parks - to ensure easy access and focused on more deprived areas.

The UK NSC and UK Government decisions raise an important question for the Senedd; how long does Wales have to wait until a target lung cancer screening programme is available here?

Lung Cancer in Wales

Tenovus Cancer Care published "[Tackling Inequalities: Lung Cancer](#)". The report sets out the challenge posed by the disease, the inequalities at the heart of the problem, current preventative interventions and more innovative approaches being developed to identify and diagnose lung cancer earlier.

Around 1800 people die every year from lung cancer, making it the biggest cause of cancer death in the country.

So many people die as a result of late diagnosis. Around 45% of people are diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer when the cancer may have spread around the body and fewer treatment options exist.

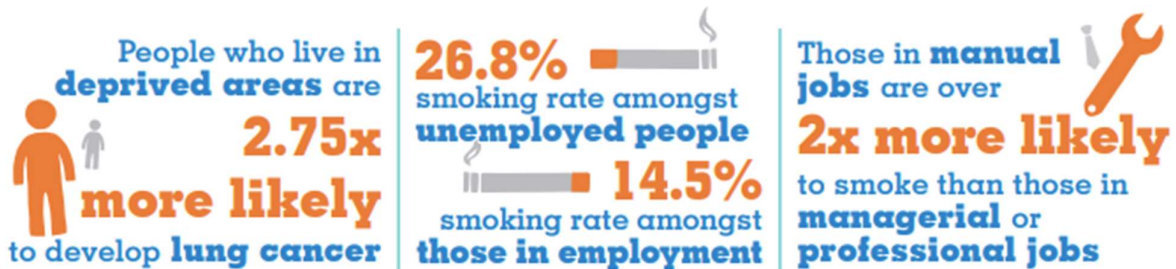
Yet despite its seriousness, a lung cancer diagnosis need not be a death sentence. Caught early enough, rates of survival are reasonably high.

¹ The UK National Screening Committee (UK NSC) advises ministers and the NHS in the 4 UK countries about all aspects of population screening and supports implementation of screening programmes.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-lung-cancer-screening-roll-out-to-detect-cancer-sooner>



Across Wales lung cancer is not experienced equally. The disease is linked to inequalities and takes a terrible toll Wales' most vulnerable communities.



Everyone deserves the same chance of survival from lung cancer. Tackling inequality is a priority for Tenovus Cancer Care, at the heart of everything we do.

Lung cancer is also regarded as one of six “Less Survivable Cancers”, cancers of the lungs, liver, brain, oesophagus, pancreas, and stomach. These have an average five-year survival rate in Wales of just 14%. These cancers are as deadly as they were decades ago, compared to other common cancers.

We believe that pan-cancer commitments, ambitions, and targets have led to less survivable cancers being overlooked and under-resourced. Tenovus Cancer Care contributes to [the Less Survivable Cancers Taskforce](#), the UK-wide charity-led coalition tackling these inequalities.

Wales needs targeted action to diagnose less survivable cancers earlier and faster; to ensure everyone receives the best care and treatment available; and for substantive research funding to close the gap on cancer inequality.

Smoking Cessation Services

All smoking cessation services in Wales fall within the Help Me Quit brand, and over time these will tackle rates of lung cancer, and lung cancer inequalities. However, these services are also prone to inequalities.

People in more deprived areas are less likely to quit, although they might make the same number of cessation attempts as people in less deprived areas. They face significant barriers that must be addressed to prevent an increase in health inequalities:

- Smoking is normalised and embedded in communities, contributing to reduced peer support.

- Other unmet needs make quitting a lower priority.
- Decreased access to pharmacies or GP surgeries due to distance, time or transport issues.
- Increased socio-economic stress can lead to using smoking becoming a coping mechanism.

Targeted Lung Cancer Screening in Wales?

Despite the recommendation of the UK NSC, and Wales' own history of social deprivation and industrial heritage there are currently no pilots or studies in Wales to study the effectiveness of lung health checks.

One is planned for Wales, but data and evidence used to inform the UK NSC recommendation and UK Government commitment came from research [largely taking place across England](#).

Tenovus Cancer Care has been closely involved in the development of the lung health check pilot as a 3rd sector partner. The pilot will be carried out within the Cwm Taf University Health Board area from autumn 2023 onwards.

Less clear is the development and rolling out of a targeted lung cancer screening programme across Wales. The Welsh Government has not yet said whether it will direct Public Health Wales to implement a targeted lung cancer screening programme in light of the positive recommendation from the UK NSC and the decision taken by the UK Government with regards to the phased introduction of a screening programme in England.

The introduction of targeted lung cancer screening across Wales could prevent more than 20% of lung cancer deaths amongst those screened and improve health outcomes for many more patients.

A new screening programme would complement smoking cessation services. Studies and trial data demonstrates that smokers who attend Lung Health Checks are more likely to successfully stop smoking, especially if they were identified for screening.

By targeting smokers between the ages of 55 and 75, it is predicted that many lung cancers could be identified at a much earlier stage.

More than 190 lives a year in Wales could be saved by diagnosing people before they present with symptoms.

However, other cancer screening programmes have encountered low or reducing uptake, particularly amongst people from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The success of the phased introduction of targeted lung cancer screening in England can be

Potential barriers to screening uptake in deprived areas:

- Transport
- Time off from work
- Believing themselves too old to benefit
- Fear of lung cancer as a death sentence
- Discomfort with medical professionals/a medical environment
- Carer responsibilities
- Fear of judgement
- Belief that screening is for those with symptoms

attributed, in part, to the location of the screening services. Over 70% of screening took place in mobile units in convenient places, such as supermarket car parks in areas of known social deprivation.

The success of any targeted lung screening programme will depend on uptake. Tenovus Cancer Care believe that screening will only be successful if we can change the narrative surrounding lung cancer.

With high survival rates when caught at stage 1, it is important that lung cancer is not regarded as a death sentence. Many people also believe that screening for health conditions is important only if you are symptomatic, this must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Screening can catch cancers before they are symptomatic. They drastically improve outcomes for patients and reduce the cost to the NHS.