

# Cancer Services in Wales:

A review of the strategic approach to improving  
the timeliness of diagnosis and treatment

January 2025



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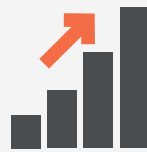
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# Key facts

## Exhibit 1: key facts

Cancer is the **leading cause of death** in Wales

Wales has the **second highest** cancer mortality in the UK. The UK has one of the highest cancer mortality rates of all OECD countries



Five-year cancer survival has improved. **62%** of people diagnosed with cancer between 2016-2022 survived at five years compared to **54%** of people diagnosed between 2002-2006



**4 in 10** annual cancer cases in Wales could be prevented



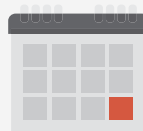
At £719 million in 2022-23, spending on cancer services was the **third highest area of NHS spending** after mental health and trauma and orthopaedics

Real terms spending on cancer services has **increased by 54%** from 2009-10 to 2022-23



Since August 2020, no health board has met the overall target that **75%** of patients should start their first definitive treatment within **62 days** of first suspicion of cancer

From August 2023 to August 2024, between **53%** and **61%** of patients started treatment within **62 days**



In 2021, **24%** of cancer patients were diagnosed at stage 4 and **18%** at stage 3



Survival decreases as stage advances for all cancer types



Bowel screening eligibility has expanded in stages since October 2021. It now includes people aged **50 to 74** and uses a more sensitive test.

From July 2023 to July 2024, just **21%** of bowel screening participants referred to their health board for a colonoscopy were offered the procedure within 4 weeks against a standard of **90%**

Breast and cervical screening uptake were **below standard**



Non-melanoma skin cancer, bowel, female breast, lung and prostate cancers are the most **common cancers** in Wales

Source: Audit Wales

Notes:

\*Welsh Government data: NHS Expenditure by programme budget category and year, 'cancer and tumours', on StatsWales

# Key messages

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## Context

- 1 One in two people in the UK born after 1960 will be diagnosed with some form of cancer during their lifetime<sup>1</sup>. Many people go on to survive cancer and lead healthy lives. Early diagnosis and timely treatment are key to survival for most cancers.
- 2 Services to detect, diagnose and treat cancers and to support cancer patients are provided by many public and third sector organisations. Some services, notably Systemic Anti-Cancer Therapy<sup>2</sup> and radiotherapy, mostly serve cancer patients. However, much of the outpatient, diagnostic and surgical capacity needed for cancer patients is part of the wider planned care system.
- 3 The Welsh Government is responsible for setting the vision and targets for health care and for the allocation of funding. It sets out a range of expectations for the NHS Executive, including supporting improvement in cancer services, through an annual remit letter. The National Strategic Clinical Network for Cancer<sup>3</sup> is part of the NHS Executive and brings together clinicians and health professionals to support improvement. Health boards are responsible for providing high quality care to patients and meeting performance targets. **Appendix 1** explains roles and responsibilities for cancer services and key elements of the strategic approach.
- 4 Our work has examined the coherence of the national arrangements to drive improvements in cancer services in Wales. The report includes an overview of NHS Wales' performance in providing cancer diagnosis and treatment and offers views on the prospects for improvement, including through prevention. The report does not comment on the performance of individual NHS bodies as this will be examined as part of the Auditor General's 2025 programme of local audit work at those bodies. **Appendix 3** provides more detail about our work.

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1 Cancer Research UK.

2 Systemic Anti-Cancer Therapy includes chemotherapy, immunotherapy and hormonal therapy.

3 Called the Wales Cancer Network at the time. We refer to the Network as the 'Cancer Network' throughout the report for ease of reference.

## Overall conclusions

- 5 Overall, we found that despite increased investment, there is a continuing failure to meet the national performance targets for cancer with a minority of patients facing unacceptably long waits for diagnosis and/ or treatment. Cancer outcomes in Wales have improved over recent years but are still poor compared to other countries. Stronger and clearer national leadership is urgently needed to help drive the necessary improvements in the timeliness and sustainability of cancer diagnosis and treatment.

## Key findings

### Performance and resources

- 6 Demand from suspected cancer patients is increasing ahead of the NHS' ability to meet it. As a result, the waiting list for diagnosis and treatment is growing. Our indicative modelling shows that without a significant increase in activity to diagnose and treat patients, the waiting list will not return to pre-pandemic levels.
- 7 The national target that 75% of cancer patients should start their first definitive treatment within 62 days of first suspicion has not been met by any of Wales' health boards since August 2020. Performance deteriorated following the pandemic and has been stable since early 2022 with between 52% and 61% of patients starting their treatment within the target time. Waiting times for some cancer types are particularly long with some patients waiting over 100 days for treatment<sup>4</sup>. There are also growing waits between diagnosis and the start of treatment.
- 8 A significant minority of people are being picked up with late-stage cancer which impacts their likelihood of survival. In 2021, patients diagnosed with cancers of the gall bladder, pancreas and lung were more likely than patients with other types of cancers to be diagnosed at stage four (74%, 52% and 48% of patients).
- 9 Screening plays a vital role in early detection. While the standard for uptake of bowel screening is being achieved, this is not the case for breast and cervical screening programmes.

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4 See **Exhibit 8**.

- 10 Patient outcomes have improved over time. But Wales has the second highest cancer mortality rate in the UK after Scotland. The UK itself has a worse rate than many OECD countries. Mortality rates in Wales are significantly worse for people living in deprived areas and the gap between the most and least deprived is growing.
- 11 Real terms spending on cancer care over the last 13 years has grown considerably more than the overall increase in real terms NHS spending. However, this increase does not necessarily translate into extra activity as there are a range of inflationary cost pressures, including costs of drugs and new treatments. There are also challenges around capacity – including gaps in the workforce and concerns about a shortage of modern scanning equipment.

## **Strategic direction**

- 12 The Welsh Government has set out its high-level strategic vision for cancer services in its 2021 Quality Statement for Cancer. In February 2023, at the request of the then Minister for Health and Social Care, the Cancer Network published a three-year Cancer Improvement Plan as a collated NHS response to the Quality Statement. The NHS Executive is developing a National Cancer Recovery Programme as part of the wider national approach to transforming planned care. The Welsh Government has also launched a 'Cancer: Improving Outcomes' initiative through its Life Sciences Hub aimed fostering innovation and collaboration between the NHS and industry.
- 13 Whilst these various developments demonstrate a clear national commitment to improve cancer services, their collective efficacy is undermined by a lack of clarity over the status of the three-year Cancer Improvement Plan. Welsh Government officials were clear that the Plan was not their document but rather the collated response of the NHS to the Quality Statement.
- 14 However, NHS and third sector bodies are confused about the Cancer Improvement Plan's status and what, if anything, they should be doing to implement it. Many were also confused about the links between the Improvement Plan, the National Cancer Recovery Programme and the Cancer: Improving Outcomes initiative.
- 15 There is similar confusion about the split of leadership and accountability between the Welsh Government and the NHS Executive and about roles within the NHS Executive. Overall, we identified a consensus, including within the Welsh Government and the NHS Executive, that the arrangements were not yet providing the strong leadership needed to drive system-wide improvement in cancer services.

- 16 We identified examples of important Welsh Government investment to improve cancer services and broader planned care including rapid diagnostic centres and a new cancer centre for Velindre NHS Trust. However, the pace at which some new developments are taken forward can be slow, in areas such as digital cellular pathology and lung cancer screening.
- 17 There is also a risk that the Welsh Government may not get a good return on its £3.4 million investment in a National Imaging Academy. The Academy is training more radiologists to address workforce shortages, but some NHS bodies have not been able to create jobs for newly qualified people.
- 18 The Welsh Government relies heavily on its performance management arrangements to oversee and drive improvement. However, these arrangements are focussed predominantly on the 62-day timeliness target, which only covers part of the patient pathway. The Welsh Government told us it also focuses on delivery of National Optimised Pathways, although at the time of drafting the NHS Executive was still developing plans for monitoring compliance with those pathways.
- 19 The Welsh Government's Quality Statement does not set out any specific expectations in respect of cancer prevention despite around 38% of cancers being preventable. Whilst there are other Welsh Government strategies and frameworks aimed at encouraging healthier lifestyles these do not constitute a coherent policy framework for population health and disease prevention.
- 20 Data and digital are two other key areas for improvement. We identified inaccuracies in national data and a need for more consistent national data that helps track delivery across the patient pathway. Work is underway to replace the previous outdated cancer information system. However, progress has been slow, and services continue to rely on fragmented digital systems that consume time and carry risks to patient safety.





The Welsh Government's Quality Statement, the identification of nationally optimised pathways and the publication of a Cancer Improvement Plan are all examples of a clear commitment to secure high quality cancer care for the people of Wales.

However, despite this and increased investment over recent years, too many people are experiencing unacceptably long waits for cancer diagnosis and treatment. Variations in performance and outcomes persist within and between health bodies in Wales, and insufficient attention is being placed on prevention of the lifestyle factors that can cause cancer and other major health conditions.

The arrangements for the national leadership and oversight of cancer services in Wales need to be clarified and strengthened as a matter of urgency. This must include a clear statement on the status of the NHS Wales Cancer Improvement Plan and how the Welsh Government and NHS Executive expect it to be used, alongside other programmes and initiatives, to shape the improvements which are needed in cancer services in Wales."

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**Adrian Crompton**  
Auditor General for Wales





# Recommendations

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## Exhibit 2: recommendations

### **Setting out a coherent, long-term strategic approach for cancer in Wales, supported by clear system leadership and informed oversight**

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- R1 The Welsh Government should publicly clarify the status of the Cancer Improvement Plan and its links to the National Cancer Recovery Programme and the Cancer: Improving Outcomes initiative. As part of this the Welsh Government should clarify how it intends to hold NHS bodies to account for delivery of the Cancer Improvement Plan.
- R2 The Welsh Government should set out a coherent model for system leadership in respect of cancer services that clarifies its own role and that of the NHS Executive and sets out how it will bring on board clinicians and other key stakeholders to build a common view of cancer service performance, quality and opportunities for improvement.
- R3 The Welsh Government should review its oversight and performance framework in respect of cancer services to focus on a broader range of issues, including a more explicit alignment to the ambitions and quality attributes set out in the Quality Statement for Cancer.

## **Developing the strategic approach to population health improvement and disease prevention**

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- R4 The Welsh Government should develop a more coherent approach to population health improvement by setting out how it intends to use its Science Evidence Advice: NHS in 10+ Years to harness the opportunities associated with prevention to reduce the incidence of cancer and other major conditions.

## **Exploiting specific opportunities for improvement**

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- R5 The Welsh Government should work with Public Health Wales to accelerate decision making for a national lung screening programme. It should clarify as soon as possible whether it will fund national lung screening for Wales and the timescale for implementing such a programme.
- R6 As part of a wider approach to encourage greater regional working between health boards, the Welsh Government and the NHS Executive should work with the service to understand and help address any key barriers to delivering regional services. This should include working with DHCW to identify digital solutions to support shared waiting lists for cancer diagnosis and treatment, where it is appropriate to do so.
- R7 The Welsh Government should work with the NHS Executive, HEIW and other NHS bodies to ensure there are employment opportunities for radiologists who have been trained in the National Imaging Academy.

## Improving Data and Digital

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- R8 The Welsh Government should clarify national roles and responsibilities for monitoring and ensuring compliance with its data standards including how it will hold NHS bodies to account for poor compliance.
- R9 The Welsh Government should work with the NHS Executive (particularly the Cancer Network), DHCW and Public Health Wales NHS Trust to develop a more comprehensive set of publicly available data on cancer services, which as a minimum should include:
- the number of people currently waiting for cancer diagnosis or treatment (open pathway data).
  - performance against the 62-day target for the health board providing diagnosis and treatment and health board of residence, including people living Powys Teaching Health Board area.
  - performance across the patient pathways including timeliness of diagnostic reporting across different tumour sites; timeliness from the decision to treat a patient to the start of that treatment (including surgery, radiotherapy and Systemic Anti-Cancer Therapy); and diagnosis and treatment of recurrent disease. Performance information should be provided at cancer sub-tumour level where possible.
  - timeliness of diagnosis and treatment for patients referred from the breast and cervical screening programmes.
  - accurate information on equity of access, including ethnicity of cancer patients as well as the experiences of different patient groups (this should include children and young people).
- R10 The Welsh Government should work with DHCW and NHS England to share regular and consistent data on the timeliness of diagnosis and treatment for Welsh cancer patients treated by NHS England.



# Performance and resources



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- 1.1 This part of the report looks at how well services to diagnose and treat cancer are performing, including against national targets. It considers performance in the wider context of demand, financial and capacity pressures.

### **What we looked for**

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We looked for evidence that the NHS is sustainably meeting demand to diagnose and treat cancer; whether it is meeting the national performance targets for timeliness of cancer diagnosis and treatment; and for evidence that outcomes for cancer patients are improving and compare well internationally.

## Demand is increasing ahead of the NHS's ability to meet it and the waiting list for diagnosis and/ or treatment is growing

### The number of people referred for suspected cancer has continued to rise following a sharp drop during the pandemic

- 1.2 Suspected cancer referrals create demand for NHS services even though the vast majority of those referrals (over 84%<sup>5</sup>) go on to find out that they do not have cancer. Around 80% of patients with suspected cancer are referred by GPs. However, because they are far less likely than those coming from other routes<sup>6</sup> to actually have cancer, those referred by GPs only make up around 54% of patients who go on to start treatment.
- 1.3 The number of suspected cancer referrals increased by 14% from June 2019 to August 2024 (**Exhibit 3**); equivalent to around 3% growth each year. Referrals have increased after a drop at the start of the pandemic. The highest numbers of referrals in August 2024 were for skin (excluding basal cell carcinoma<sup>7</sup>) and lower gastrointestinal cancers (17% and 15% of referrals respectively).

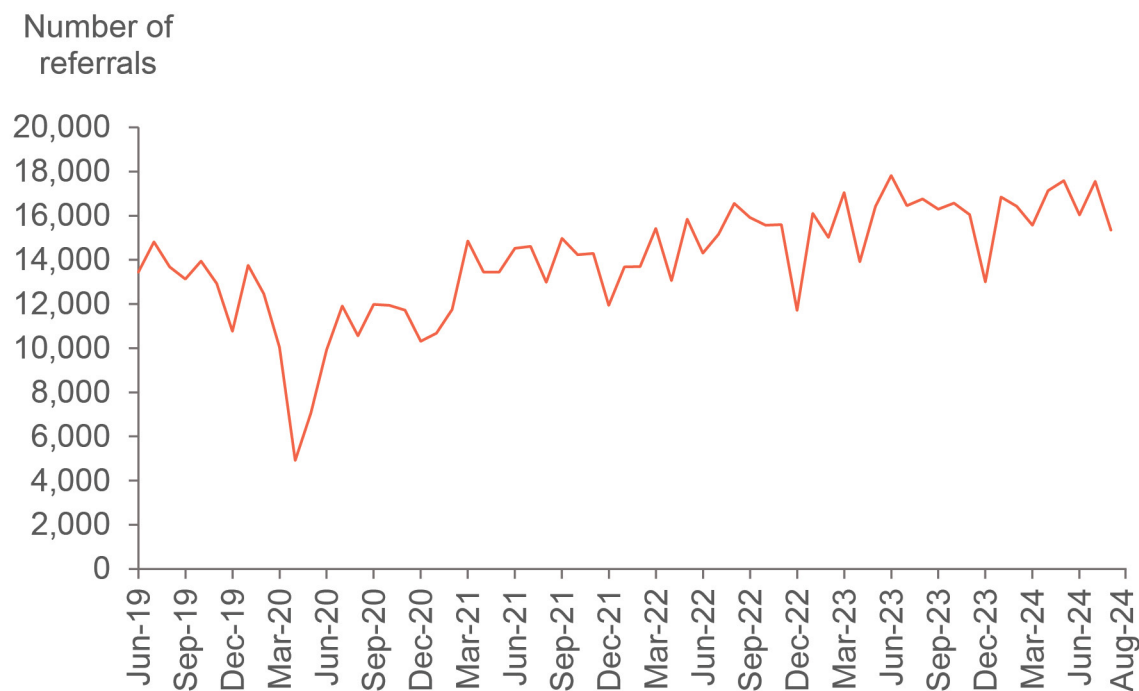
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5 Since November 2020.

6 Other routes include screening services, emergency departments, and other secondary care professionals.

7 Basal cell carcinoma is the most common type of skin cancer and less likely than other skin cancers to spread to other parts of the body. NHS Wales does not refer suspected basal cell carcinomas via the suspected cancer pathway unless there is a concern that delayed investigation may cause significant impact to the patient in line with NICE Guidance NG12, last updated October 2023.

**Exhibit 3: urgent suspected cancer referrals, June 2019 – August 2024**



Source: DHCW, Suspected Cancer Pathway – Open Pathways Dataset, on StatsWales.

Note: data from June 2019 to November 2021 is based on experimental analysis on StatsWales and may not be directly comparable to the validated data from December 2021 onwards.

1.4 The number of newly diagnosed cancer patients has also increased over time (by 22% from 2002 to 2021) (see **Appendix 2, Exhibit 26**). Numbers fell in 2020, probably because fewer people accessed healthcare during the pandemic. Numbers of newly diagnosed cancers increased in 2021 but have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. The Welsh Cancer Intelligence and Surveillance Unit (WCISU)<sup>8</sup> has not yet published clinical cancer registry data beyond 2021.

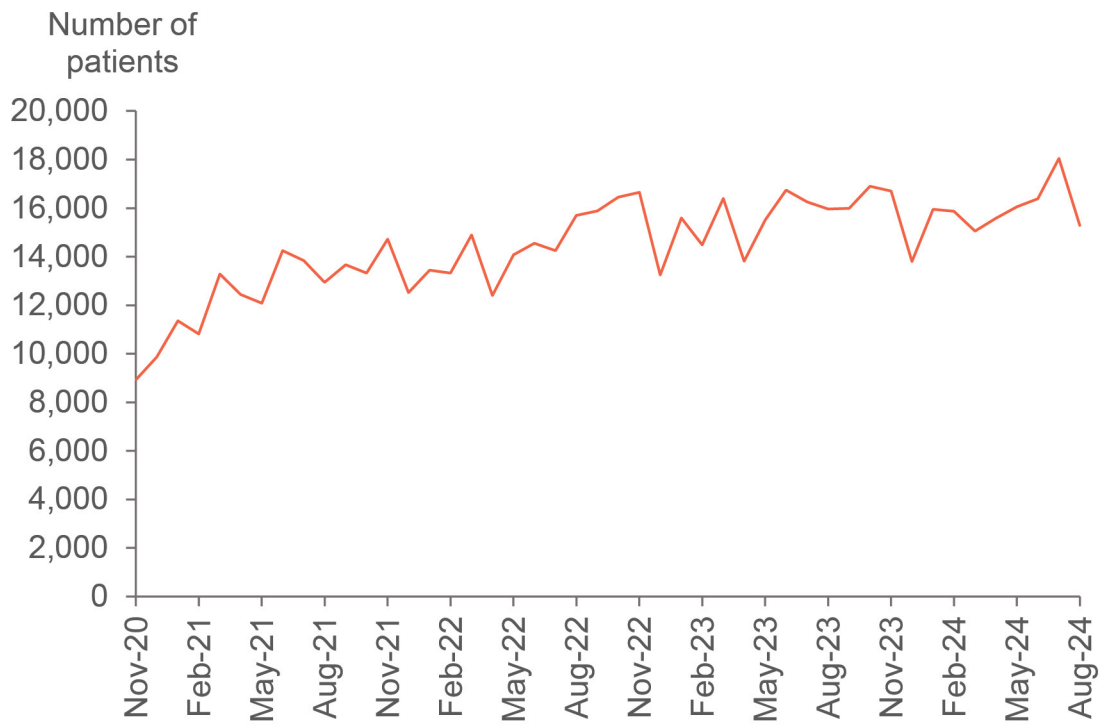
<sup>8</sup> WCISU is part of the Public Health Wales NHS Trust.



### The sharp increase in activity after the pandemic seems to have levelled off

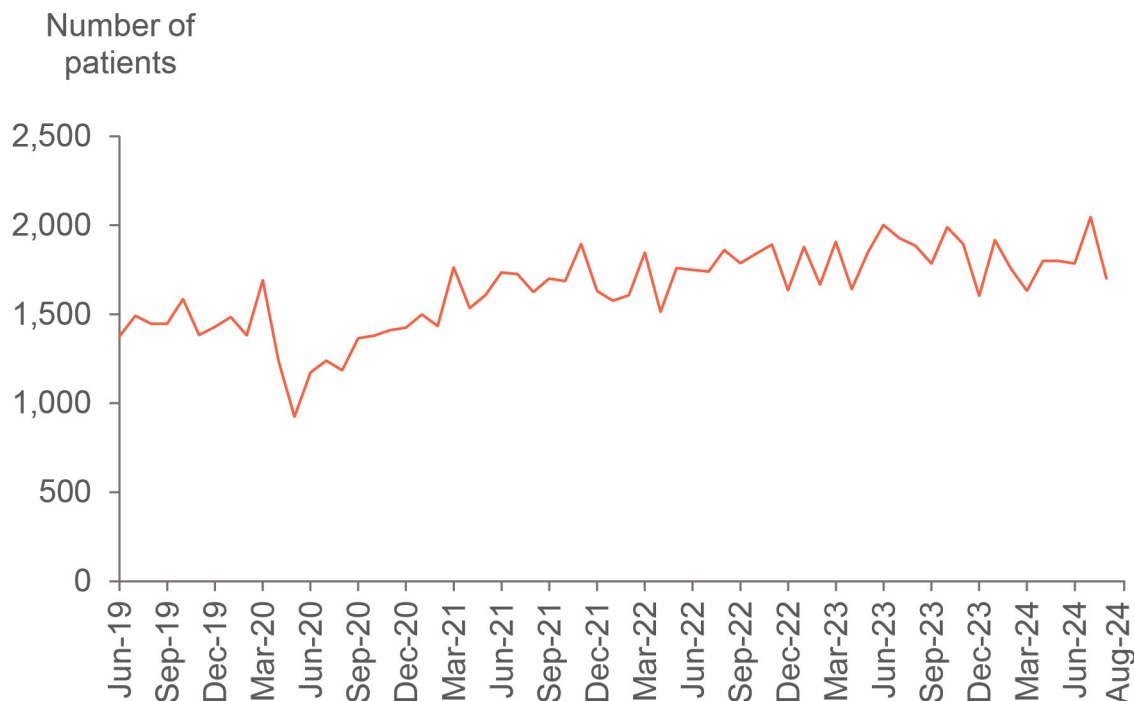
1.5 Activity to diagnose and treat suspected cancer patients<sup>9</sup> has increased since the pandemic but seems to be levelling off. The overall number of pathways closed – including those who were told they do not have cancer and those who started treatment – has increased since November 2020 (**Exhibit 4a**). There is no comparable historic data to show how overall activity levels compare with pre-pandemic levels. However, the number of patients starting treatment for cancer increased quickly after a drop at the start of the pandemic and exceeded pre-pandemic figures by March 2021 (**Exhibit 4b**). The number of patients starting treatment appears to have to broadly levelled out from November 2022.

**Exhibit 4a: all closed pathways November 2020 – August 2024**



<sup>9</sup> As measured by pathways closed.

**Exhibit 4b: pathways closed due to patient starting first treatment, June 2019 – August 2024**



Source: DHCW, Suspected Cancer Pathway – Closed Pathways Dataset, on StatsWales.

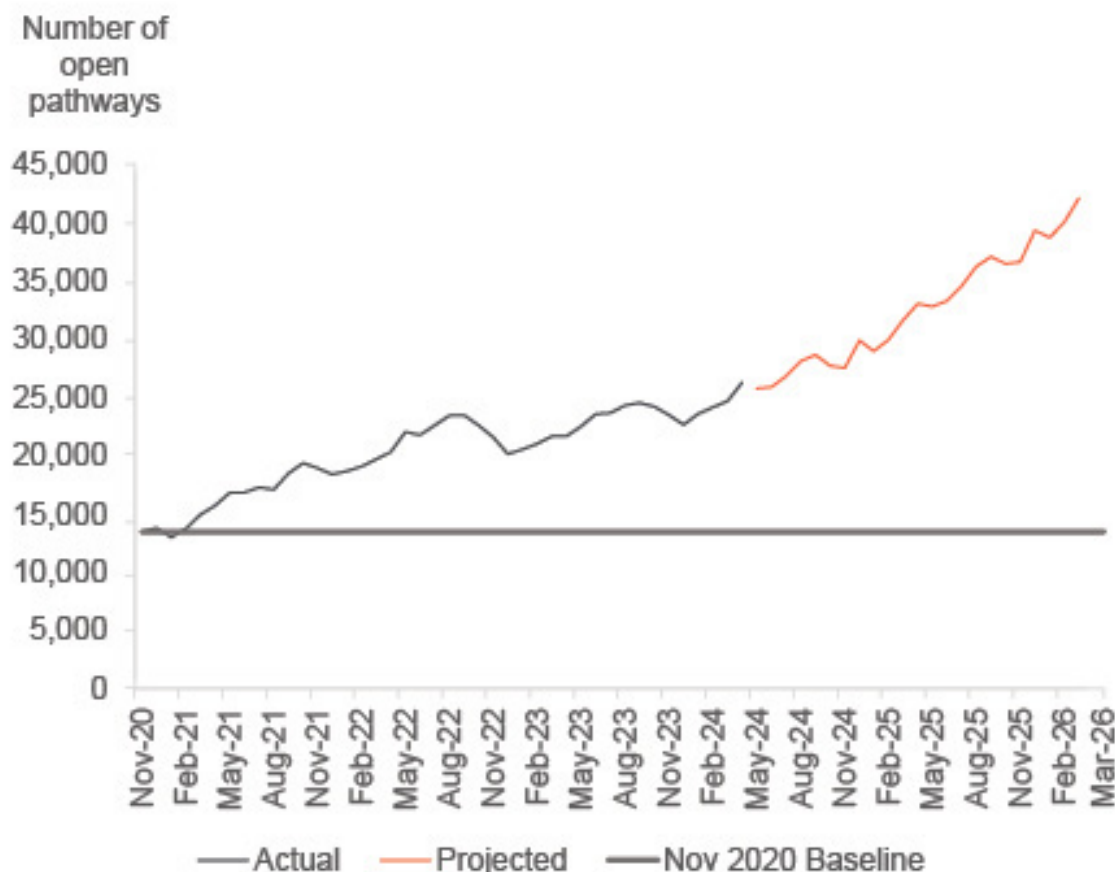
1.6 The available data understates the amount of activity because it only includes activity to the point of first treatment. Many people will need multiple episodes of care after they start their first treatment. It is likely that the amount of activity after first starting treatment is growing with the increasing complexity of new treatments, particularly in immunotherapy. The three cancer centres in Wales<sup>10</sup> hold information on the timeliness of access to radiotherapy and Systemic Anti-Cancer Therapy. However, inconsistencies in the way some of the data is collected means it cannot currently provide any insight on national trends or comparative timeliness of ongoing treatment across Wales.

10 In north Wales, southwest Wales, and south Wales. The centres are managed individually by Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, Swansea Bay University Health Board and Velindre NHS Trust.

## **The numbers of patients awaiting diagnosis or treatment is growing and our analysis suggests the NHS needs to further increase activity if it is to reduce the backlog and sustainably meet demand**

- 1.7 As part of its vision for quality cancer care, the Welsh Government wants to see the waiting list volume return to pre-pandemic levels. It has also set a target that 80% of cancer patients start treatment within 62-days by March 2026. However, the waiting list for diagnosis and/ or treatment has continued to increase, and it is difficult to see how that target will be achieved (**Exhibit 5**). Our indicative modelling shows that the list will continue to grow based on recent trends of demand and activity. It is clear that without a significant increase in activity to diagnose and treat more patients the waiting list is unlikely to return to previous levels.

**Exhibit 5: actual and modelled numbers of open suspected cancer pathways to March 2026**



Source: Audit Wales analysis of DHCW data, open suspected cancer pathways at month end

Note: Patients may have more than one pathway if they are waiting for diagnosis or treatment for more than one cancer.

Our projection assumed demand, as measured by referrals, increases by 3% a year in line with recent trends and that activity increases by 1% a year.

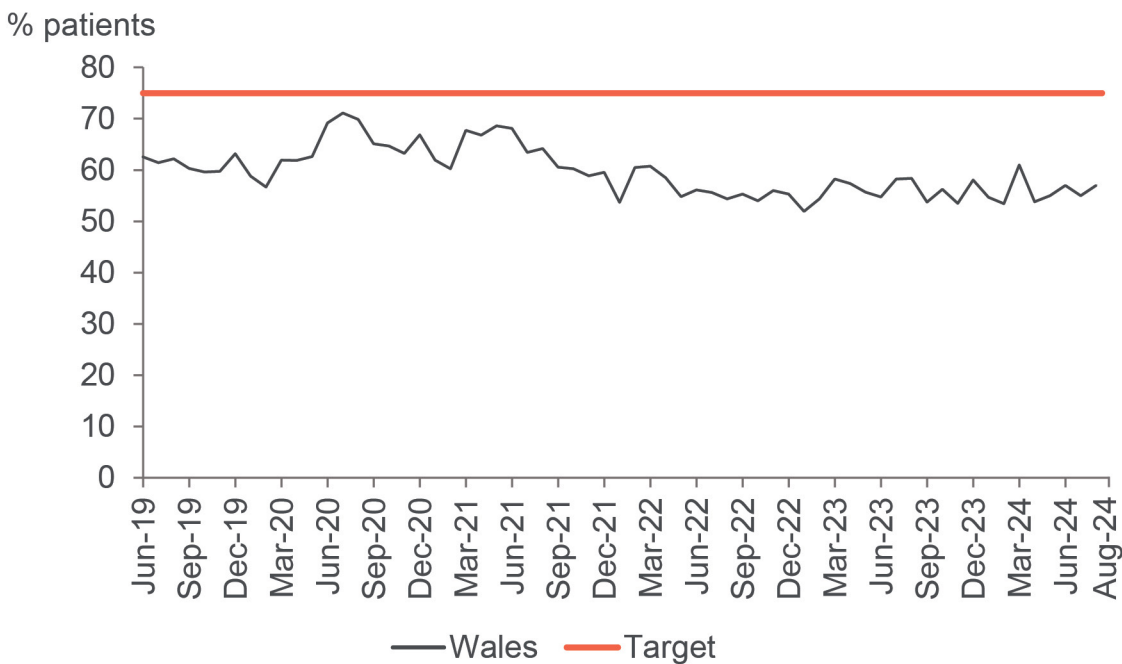
1.8 Much of the capacity the NHS uses to diagnose and treat cancer patients is also used for other non-cancer patient pathways. Achieving the political and policy ambitions to improve access to both cancer and wider planned care within the system’s existing capacity will therefore be challenging. Priorities on cancer care will need to be balanced with other planned care priorities. A consideration of how existing capacity can be better used or expanded will also be needed.

## The NHS in Wales is continuing to miss the national performance target for cancer treatment

**While the majority of patients start their treatment within 62 days, performance is well short of the national target of 75%**

1.9 The Welsh Government started implementing its Suspected Cancer Pathway in June 2019, with a target that 75% of cancer patients should start their first definitive treatment within 62 days of the first suspicion of cancer<sup>11</sup>. No health board has met the overall 75% target since August 2020 although performance has been better for some individual tumour sites (**paragraphs 1.10 and 1.11**). During the summer of 2020, referrals were lower and health boards were prioritising urgent and cancer care over other patients due to the pandemic. Since then, despite some month on month variations, performance has stayed between 52 and 61% (**Exhibit 6**).

**Exhibit 6: performance against the 62-day Suspected Cancer Pathway Target, June 2019 – August 2024**

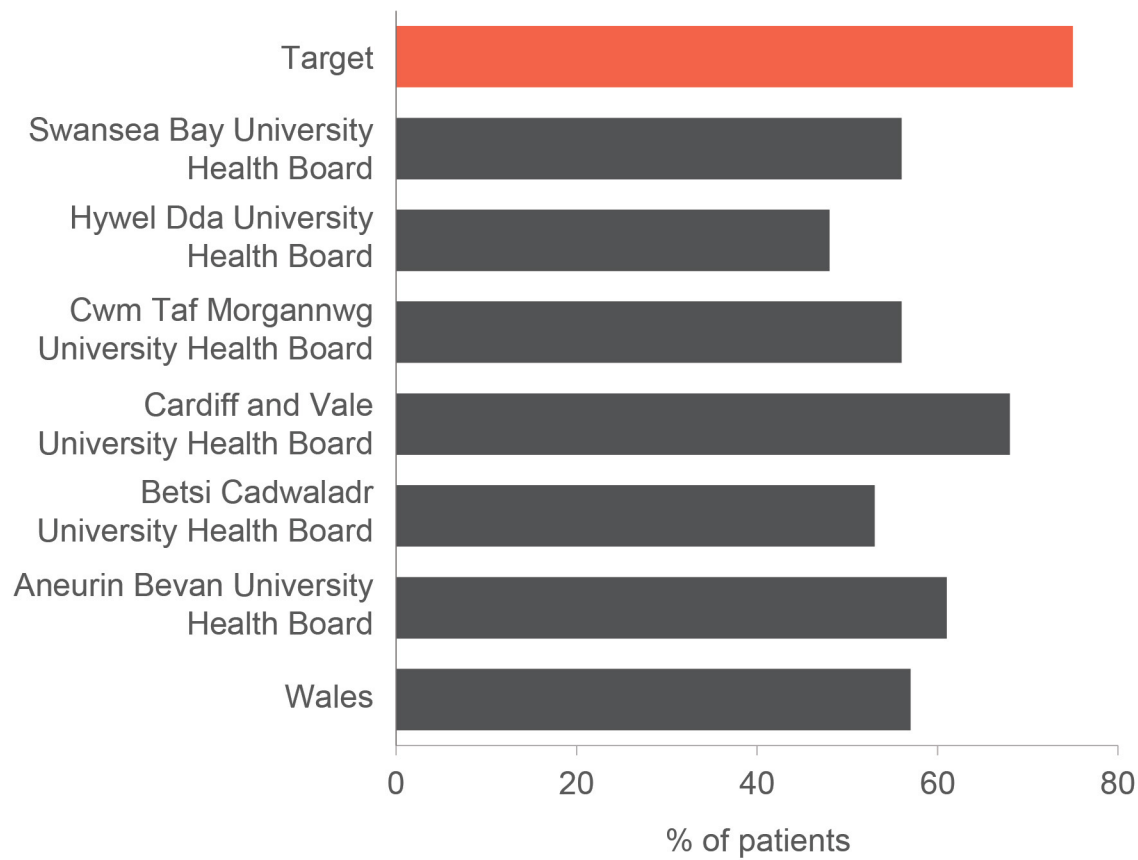


Source: DHCW, Suspected Cancer Pathway – Closed Pathways Dataset, on StatsWales.

11 Some data on performance against the target is available from June 2019 and the Welsh Government officially required health boards to report against the target from February 2021.

1.10 There is considerable variation and fluctuation in performance against the target by health board area. In August 2024, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board was closest to meeting the target at 68%, and Hywel Dda University Health Board was the worst performer at 48% (**Exhibit 7**). Health board performance has fluctuated considerably since 2019 (see **Appendix 2, Exhibits 27a to f**).

**Exhibit 7: health board performance against the 62-day Suspected Cancer Pathway Target, August 2024**



Source: DHCW, Suspected Cancer Pathway – Closed Pathways dataset, on StatsWales.

Note: StatsWales publishes data for residents of each health board unless they are treated by NHS England. Residents of Powys Teaching Health Board treated by other Welsh health boards are included in that health boards' figures. StatsWales does not distinguish between residents of Powys and residents of the health board they are treated by.

## Time to start treatment varies by type of cancer and some patients can face unacceptably long waits

1.11 Waiting times vary depending on the site of the cancer. Waiting times for skin cancer, excluding basal cell carcinoma (BCC) have been consistently above the 75% target, aside from a brief dip in November 2023. However, waiting times for other tumour sites have rarely been at or above the target at an all-Wales level<sup>12</sup>. Waiting times for gynaecological, lower gastrointestinal and urological cancers, and sarcoma are particularly poor with less than half of patients starting their first treatment within 62 days of first suspicion in August 2024 (**Exhibit 8**). Performance may vary within the sub-tumour sites<sup>13</sup> for these cancers but there is no nationally available information to understand performance by sub-tumour site (**recommendation 9**).

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12 Performance for breast and lung cancers briefly met the target in June 2021 but has deteriorated since. Brain and central nervous system and haematological cancers, acute leukaemia and sarcoma have all met the target at various points from November 2020 to June 2024 but represent low numbers of patients.

13 For instance, cervical and ovarian cancers are both gynaecological sub tumour sites.

**Exhibit 8: performance against the Suspected Cancer Pathway target, median and 75th percentile waits for gynaecological, lower gastrointestinal, skin, and urological cancers, and sarcoma, and August 2024**



**Performance against the 75% target**

**Median waiting times**

**75<sup>th</sup> percentile waiting times**

	Performance against the 75% target	Median waiting times	75 <sup>th</sup> percentile waiting times
Skin (excluding BCC)	80%	35 days	61 days
Sarcoma	20%	No data	No data
Urological	40%	86 days	132 days
Gynaecological	35%	83 days	115 days
Lower gastrointestinal	45%	70 days	106 days

Source: DHCW, Suspected Cancer Pathway – Closed Pathways Dataset on StatsWales (data on performance against the 75% target) and DHCW data on the Suspected Cancer Dashboard (data on median and 75th percentile waits).

Note: Median waiting time is point where half the people have had their treatment and the other half are still waiting. The 75<sup>th</sup> percentile represents the time when 75% of people have had their treatment but 25% are still waiting.



## While diagnostic waits are getting shorter, waits between diagnosis and starting treatment are getting longer

- 1.12 Health board, NHS Executive and Welsh Government officials told us that delays at diagnostic stage are one of the main reasons for poor performance against the 62-day cancer target. Median waits from first suspicion of cancer to first diagnostic test have fallen from 20 days in February 2021 to 16 in August 2024. Depending on the type of cancer, patients usually face another wait between having a diagnostic test and finding out whether they have cancer (diagnosis). Median waits from first suspicion to actual diagnosis increased from 26 days in February 2021 to 36 in January 2022 but fell to 27 in August 2024<sup>14</sup>.
- 1.13 Our analysis<sup>15</sup> points to problems between diagnosis and starting treatment. Between February 2021 and August 2024, median waits from diagnosis to treatment increased by 38% from 21 days to 29. Waits between diagnosis and treatment vary between tumour sites, with patients with lower gastrointestinal and breast cancers waiting longer than those with other cancer types in August 2024<sup>16</sup> (**Exhibit 9**).
- 1.14 There are also considerable variations in waits at other stages of the pathway across tumour sites. For instance, in August 2024, the median wait for urological cancers was 16 days from first suspicion to diagnostic test, 49 days from first suspicion to diagnosis, and 86 days from first suspicion to the start of treatment. By comparison, the median wait for skin cancers was 41 days from first suspicion to diagnostic test and 34 days from first suspicion to diagnosis, and 35 days from first suspicion to the start of treatment (**Exhibit 9**).

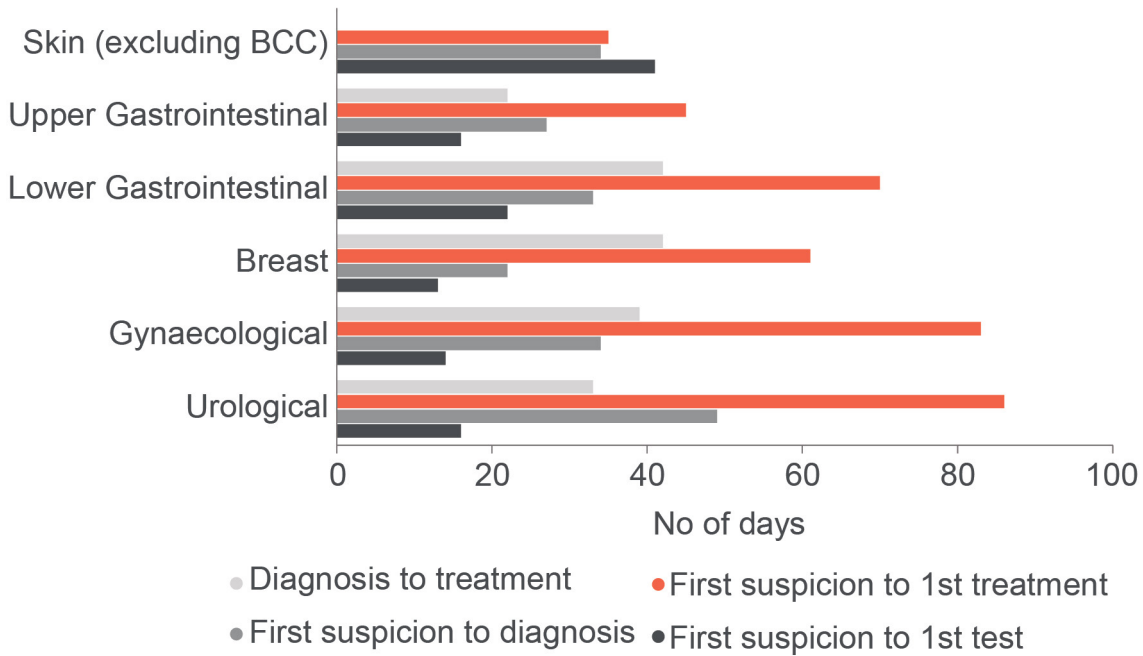
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14 **Appendix 2, Exhibit 28** gives median waits from first suspicion to diagnosis over time.

15 Of DHCW data from the Suspected Cancer Pathway Dashboard. DHCW only publishes median waits for the tumour sites included in **Exhibit 9**.

16 The Welsh Government does not publish median waits for all tumour sites.

**Exhibit 9: median wait from first suspicion of cancer to first test, diagnosis and starting first treatment, August 2024**



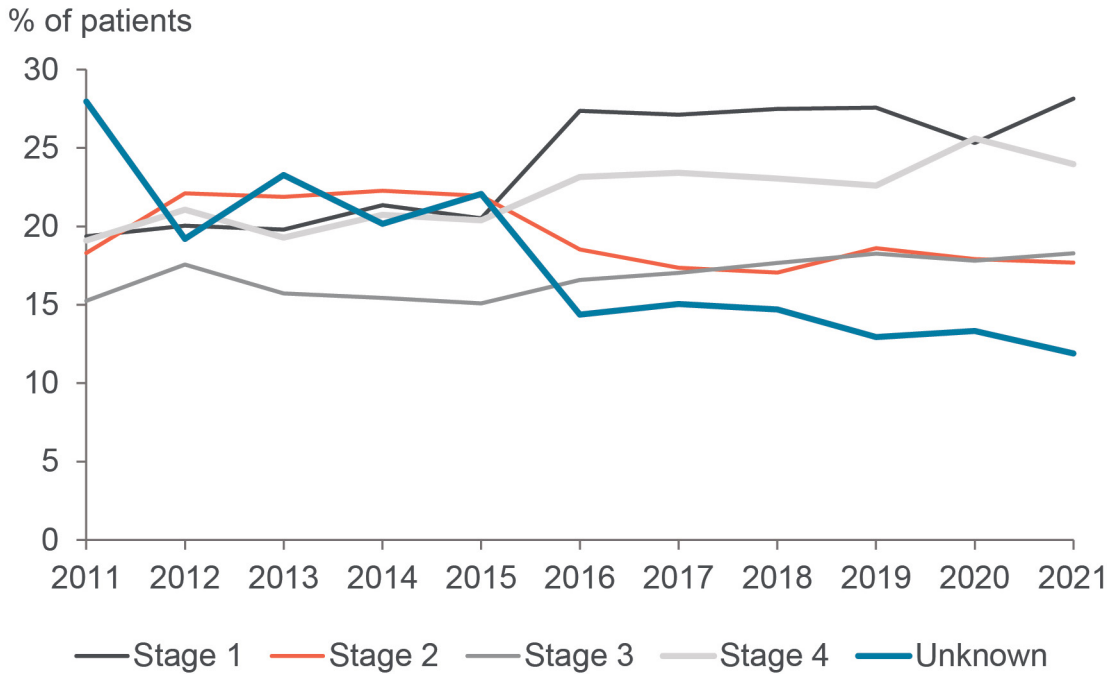
Source: DHCW data from the Suspected Cancer Pathway Dashboard

**A significant minority of people are being picked up with late-stage cancer which impacts their likelihood of survival**

1.15 Survival decreases as stage at diagnosis advances for all cancer types<sup>17</sup>. In 2021, 24% of cancer patients were diagnosed at stage four and 18% at stage 3 (**Exhibit 10**). The increase in the proportion of cancer patients diagnosed at stage 1 between 2011 and 2021 corresponds with a fall in patients diagnosed at stage 2 and patients whose stage is unknown at diagnosis. With the exception of an increase in 2020, the proportion of cancer patients diagnosed at stage 4 has ranged between 19% and 24% during the same period. Positively, the overall proportion of cancer patients whose stage at diagnosis was ‘unknown’ has significantly decreased since 2011.

17 WCISU, Cancer Survival in Welsh Residents Diagnosed Between 2002 and 2020, November 2023.

**Exhibit 10: proportion of cancer patients by stage at diagnosis, 2011 to 2021**



Source: WCISU cancer incidence data

Note: Our analysis is based on WCISU cancer incidence data which does not include ‘non-stageable’ cancer, non-melanoma skin cancer, and some rare cancer types.

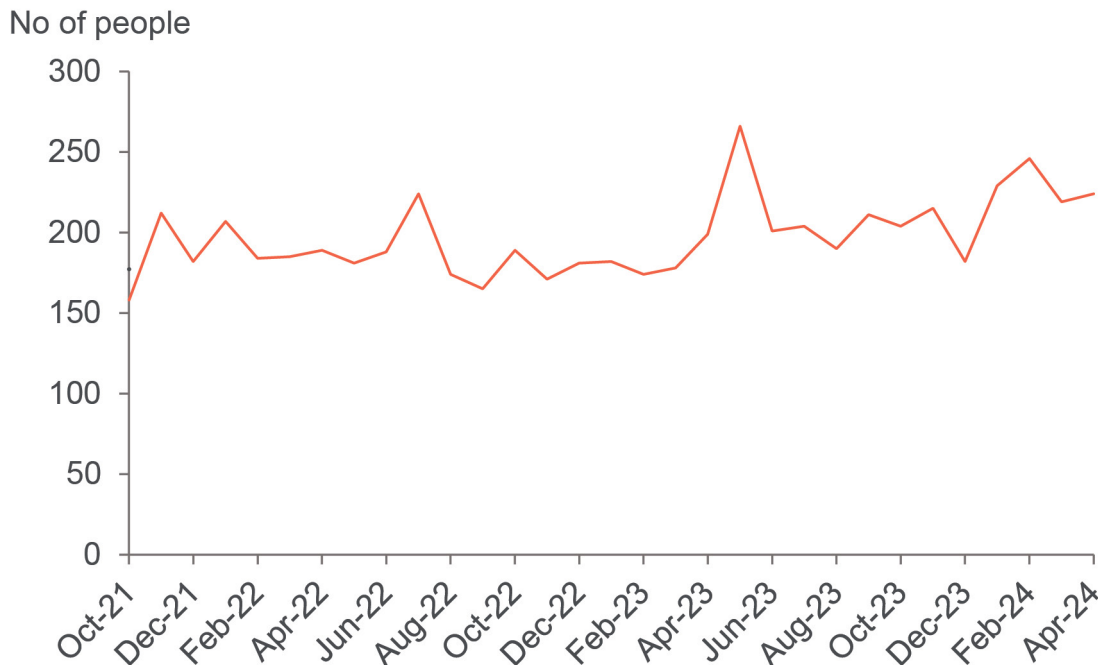
1.16 Some cancers are more likely than others to be diagnosed at a late stage, particularly asymptomatic cancers. In 2021, patients with gall bladder, pancreatic, and lung cancer were more likely than other cancer patients to be diagnosed at stage four<sup>18</sup>. 48% of lung cancer patients were diagnosed at stage four in 2021 (1,175 people). To illustrate the importance of early diagnosis, five-year survival for lung cancer diagnosed during 2016-2020 is 55% at stage one, 30% at stage two, 13% at stage three, and just 3% at stage four<sup>19</sup>.

1.17 Although the numbers are relatively small, the number of people whose suspected cancer was identified via emergency departments has increased by over 40% from October 2021 to April 2024 (**Exhibit 11**).

18 74% of patients with gall bladder cancer and 52% of patients with pancreatic cancer were diagnosed at stage 4 in 2021.

19 WCISU, Cancer Survival in Welsh Residents Diagnosed between 2002 and 2020, November 2023.

**Exhibit 11: number of urgent suspected cancer referrals via emergency departments from October 2021 to April 2024.**



Source: Audit Wales analysis of DHCW Suspected Cancer Pathway Data – closed pathways by source of suspicion.

1.18 Research by the International Cancer Benchmarking Partnership<sup>20</sup> found that countries with higher rates of cancer diagnosis after emergency presentation had poorer survival rates<sup>21</sup>. It explained that Wales and Scotland have some of the highest rates amongst comparable countries. Our own analysis found that suspected cancer patients referred from emergency departments were more likely than those referred via other routes to die before being diagnosed or starting treatment<sup>22</sup>. While some caution is needed due to the small numbers, there is an upwards trend in patients referred from emergency departments dying before treatment or diagnosis.

20 The Partnership brings together international clinicians, policymakers and researchers to identify best practice and support improved cancer outcomes for patients.

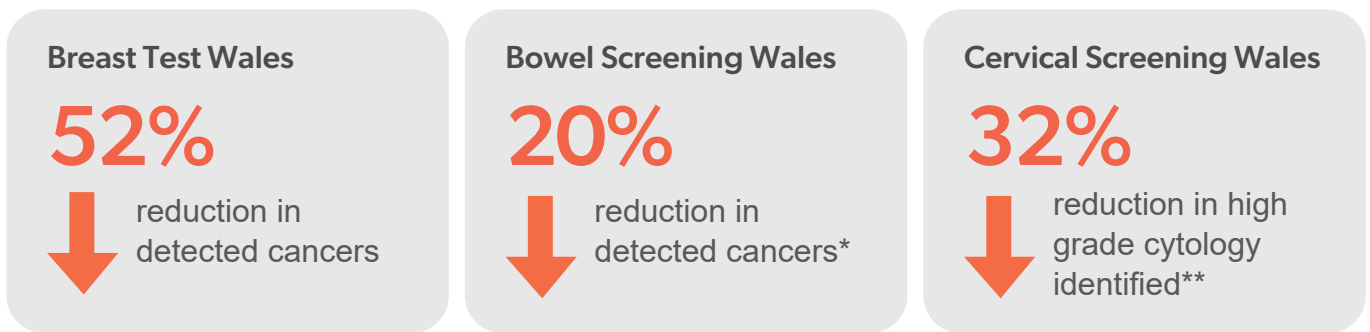
21 Abd Elkader, Alv, R; Barclay, M; Johnson, S; McPhail, S; Swann, R, Risk Factors and Prognostic Implications of Diagnosis of Cancer Within 30 Days After and Emergency Admission (Emergency Presentation): An International Cancer Benchmarking Partnership Population Based Study, 2022.

22 Based on our analysis of on our analysis of DHCW Suspected Cancer Pathway Data. In April 2024, 4% of suspected cancer patients referred from an emergency department died before starting treatment or finding out they did not have cancer compared to 1% of all suspected cancer referrals.

## There is scope to increase uptake of screening to detect cancers earlier

1.19 Screening plays a vital role in early detection. Public Health Wales NHS Trust (PHW) runs Wales’s three cancer screening programmes: Breast Test Wales, Bowel Screening Wales and Cervical Screening Wales. The Trust estimates that brief pauses to its screening programmes<sup>23</sup> at the start of the pandemic reduced the number of detected cancers in 2021 compared to previous years (**Exhibit 12**).

### Exhibit 12: reduction in cancers detected via screening, from April 2020 to March 2021 compared to the previous year



Source: PHW, Update on Population Based Screening Programmes in Wales to the Quality, Safety and Improvement Committee, June 2021

Note: \* from April 2020 to February 2021.

\*\*abnormal cells with the potential to develop into cervical cancer.

1.20 Whilst bowel screening is achieving its uptake standards, there are opportunities to increase screening uptake for the breast and cervical screening programmes which were both below the standard in August and April 2024 respectively (**Exhibit 13**). In 2022, the Trust reported differences in screening uptake for all three programmes depending on age, the health board area people live in, and whether the area is deprived or not<sup>24</sup>. It is working to address inequity in screening uptake via its Screening Equity Strategy but has not published a progress report on screening equity since June 2022.

23 Audit Wales, A Review of Arrangements to Recover Screening Services at Public Health Wales NHS Trust, August 2023, provides more information the pause and recovery screening services including performance measures, eligibility and coverage standards for each programme.

24 Public Health Wales NHS Trust, Screening Division Inequities Report 2020-21, June 2022.

**Exhibit 13: screening coverage against target, April and August 2024**

	Eligibility	Standard	Uptake
Breast Test Wales	Women aged 50 to 70 years invited for screening every three years	70%	68%*
Bowel Screening Wales	People aged 50 to 74 years invited for screening every two years	60%	65%**
Cervical Screening Wales	Women and people with a cervix aged 25-64 years invited for screening every 5 years if Human papillomavirus (HPV) negative or more frequently if HPV positive	80%	69%***

Source: Audit Wales, based on information and wording from PHW, October 2024.

Note:

\*Rolling annual rate at August 2024

\*\*Average over the previous year at August 2024

\*\*\*Age appropriate coverage at April 2024

1.21 Referrals from breast and bowel screening programmes were amongst the most likely to go on to start cancer treatment (92% and 28% respectively in 2023-24 compared to 12% overall)<sup>25</sup>. However, there is no national data on the timeliness of subsequent cancer diagnosis and treatment for people referred from breast or cervical screening. From July 2023 to July 2024, just 21% of eligible people referred from bowel screening were offered a colonoscopy by the relevant health board within four weeks of phoning to book<sup>26</sup>. The target is 90%. Waiting times for colonoscopies varied between health boards from four to 14 weeks.

25 Based on our analysis of DHCW Suspected Cancer Pathway Data. We have excluded cervical screening referrals from our analysis due to low numbers. Less than 5 people are referred with suspected cancer following cervical screening each month.

26 Public Health Wales NHS Trust, October 2024.

## **Survey data suggests that patients are generally satisfied with their cancer care, though the latest survey pre-dates the recent decline in performance**

- 1.22 Data on patient experience is collected via the annual Wales Cancer Patient Experience Survey commissioned by the Cancer Network and Macmillan Cancer Support. The most recent data is from 2021 and pre-dates the downturn in performance against the 62-day target.
- 1.23 The vast majority of cancer patients who responded to the survey rate their overall care highly. The average rating for overall care was 9 out of 10 across Wales, based on 5,859 responses. The positive results reflect the hard work and compassionate care of the many staff working across the NHS to care for and support cancer patients. 87% of respondents said that the different professionals treating and caring for them worked well together to give them the best possible care either 'always' or 'most of the time'. The survey does not ask patients how they felt about the overall length of time they waited from first suspicion to starting treatment.

## Outcomes for cancer patients are generally improving but lag behind comparable countries and are worse for people living in deprived areas

- 1.24 Cancer is the leading cause of death<sup>27</sup> in Wales, accounting for 25% of all deaths in 2022. Lung, bowel, and prostate cancer account for the largest proportions of cancer deaths<sup>28</sup>. The number of cancer deaths has increased from 8,295 in 2002 to 9,154 in 2022 and is projected to increase by 27% by 2040 (based on 2021 levels)<sup>29</sup>. The rise in cancer deaths is primarily explained by the changing age structure of the population. The age standardised rate<sup>30</sup> of cancer deaths has generally decreased since 2011 although there was a slight increase in 2022 (**Exhibit 14**).
- 1.25 The cancer death rate in Wales compares poorly to other UK nations and internationally<sup>31</sup>. Wales has had the second highest age standardised cancer death rate in the UK almost consistently since 2010 (**Exhibit 14**). The OECD compared age standardised cancer death rates in 2023, based on 2021 data. It placed the UK 35th out of 45 countries<sup>32</sup>.

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27 In 2022, 24% of deaths were caused by diseases of the circulatory system, 12% by diseases of the respiratory system, 10% by dementia and Alzheimer's, and 29% by other causes.

28 WCISU cancer mortality data.

29 National Strategic Clinical Network for Cancer, A Cancer Improvement Plan for NHS Wales 2023-26, 2023.

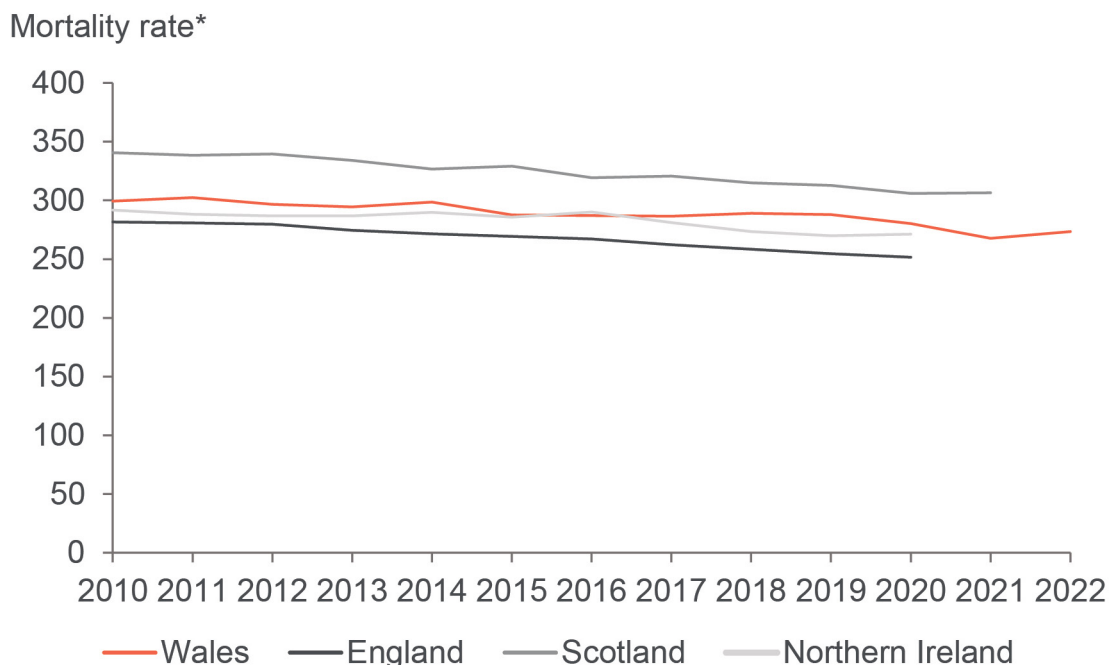
30 Deaths per 100,000 of the population taking account of differences in the age structure of different parts of Wales.

31 Many factors affect cancer incomes including the relative wealth and spending on healthcare in each country, underlying population health, and deprivation.

32 OECD, Health At A Glance 2023: OECD Indicators, OECD, 2023.



**Exhibit 14: age standardised cancer mortality rates in UK countries (excluding non-melanoma skin cancer), 2010 to 2022**



Source: WCISU cancer mortality data

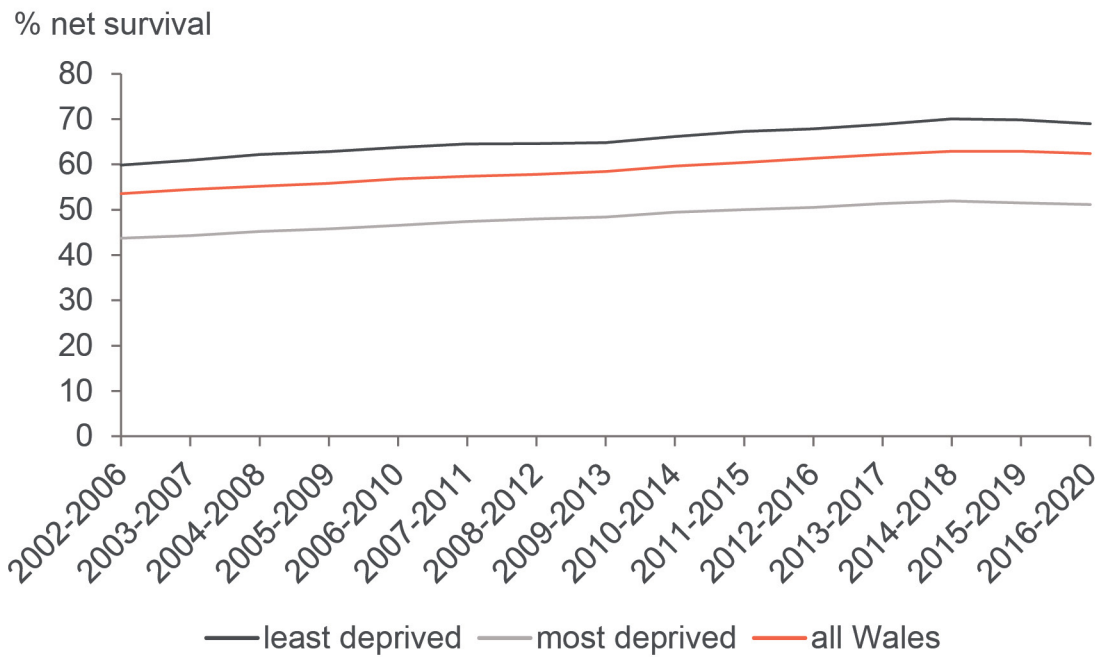
Note: \*per 100,000, adjusted to reflect the age of the population

1.26 Cancer survival<sup>33</sup> improved between 2002 and 2020. 54% of patients diagnosed with cancer from 2002-2006 survived their cancer at five years compared to 62% of patients diagnosed between 2016 and 2020. There is not yet data available to track the impact of the pandemic on survival rates. Differences in data collection methods makes it difficult to compare overall survival figures across UK countries.

1.27 There is a significant deprivation gap in survival rates. While 69% of cancer patients living in the most affluent parts of Wales survive cancer at five years, that falls to 51% for those in the most deprived areas (**Exhibit 15**). Worryingly, the deprivation gap has widened from a difference of 16 percentage points for people diagnosed between 2002-06 to 18 percentage points for people diagnosed between 2016-20.

<sup>33</sup> Cancer mortality figures show the number of deaths where cancer was the underlying cause whilst survival figures show how many people who have had cancer are still alive after a certain period of time so it takes several years for accurate data to be published.

**Exhibit 15: percentage unstandardised rolling net survival at five years comparing most and least deprived areas with the all Wales figure for patients diagnosed in the periods 2002-2006 to 2016-20 (excluding non-melanoma skin cancer).**



Source: WCISU cancer survival data

## Spending on services to diagnose, treat and support cancer patients has risen faster than overall NHS spending but there are gaps in staffing capacity

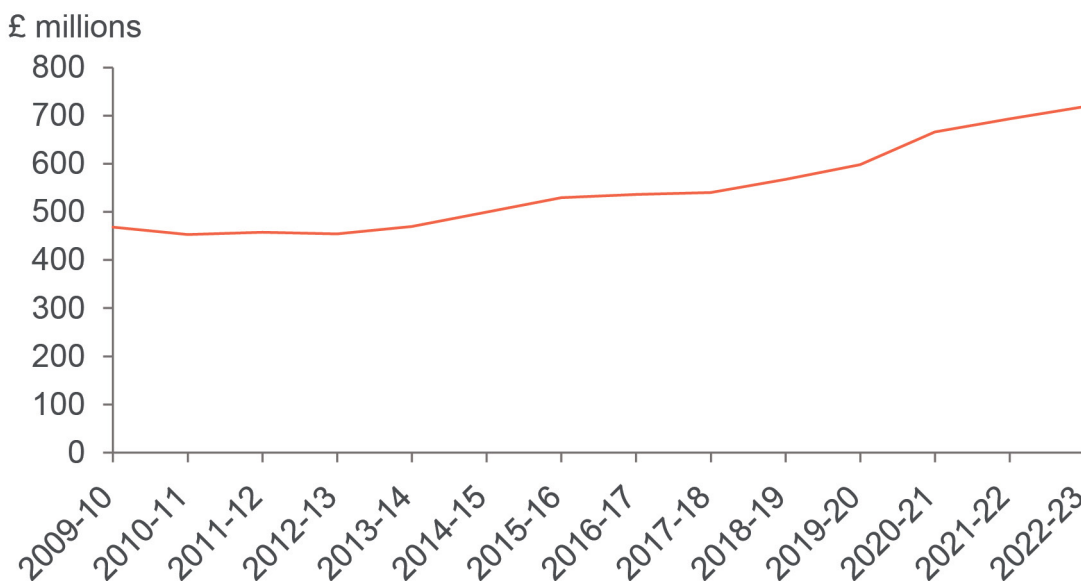
### **Real terms spending on services to diagnose, treat and support cancer patients has grown more than overall growth in NHS Wales spending but there are significant cost pressures on those services**

1.28 Real terms spending on services to diagnose, treat and support cancer patients increased by 54% from just over £450 million in 2009-10 to almost £720 million in 2022-23 (**Exhibit 16**). This increase is considerably greater than the overall 33% real terms growth in NHS Wales spending<sup>34</sup>. As a proportion of overall NHS spending, spending on services to diagnose, treat and support cancer patients has increased slightly from 7% in 2009-10 to 8% in 2022-23. Increased spending does not necessarily translate to additional capacity or activity. There are lots of cost pressures on services including rising workforce costs associated with pay growth and the use of agency staff; rising costs of existing drugs; new drugs and new technologies to improve treatment.

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<sup>34</sup> Based on revenue spending in the Welsh Government's NHS expenditure by programme budget category data on StatsWales for consistency with cancer spending figures. The NHS Finances Data Tool on our website is based on published Welsh Government budgets and gives a slightly different figure.

**Exhibit 16: real terms NHS spending on cancer, 2009-10 to 2022-23**



Source: Welsh Government, NHS Expenditure by programme budget category and year, 'cancer and tumours', on StatsWales.

Note: Real terms figures are adjusted to take account of inflation. We used HM Treasury GDP deflators at market prices and money for 2022-23, March 2024.

The Welsh Government confirmed that this data is based on NHS Wales patient activity costs including staff, consumables, medicines and overhead costs such as estates, catering, HR and finance costs.

1.29 In 2022-23 NHS Wales spent £230 per head of the population on services to diagnose, treat and support cancer patients<sup>35</sup>. Spend per head ranged from £206 in Cardiff and Vale to £270 in Swansea Bay University Health Board. An examination of the reasons behind differing spending figures across health board areas was outside the scope of this review but it is likely to reflect different local models of care and population factors including demography and deprivation.

1.30 Despite improvements in cancer waiting times being one of the key priorities for NHS Wales, the prospects for spending on services to diagnose, treat and support cancer patients are uncertain. UK public finances are under pressure. NHS bodies in Wales are already under financial strain, with six out of seven health boards overspending in 2023-24 and most projecting deficits for 2024-25. It is unclear whether they will be able to prioritise services for urgent suspected cancer patients to increase activity sufficiently to meet demand and reduce waiting times. Health boards are also under pressure to prioritise other parts of the system where performance is poor, including long waits for unscheduled care and for planned care.

35 There is no comparable data from other UK or comparable countries.

## **Workforce capacity is a significant challenge and there is an absence of information on the availability and condition of equipment**

- 1.31 Despite spending increases, workforce capacity remains a significant challenge and workforce shortages are reducing service capacity<sup>36</sup>. HEIW's Education and Training Plan 2025-26<sup>37</sup> describes 'significant national shortages and longstanding gaps' in specialist professional roles impacting diagnostics, cancer, emergency care and mental health. It highlights particular shortages in dermatologists, clinical oncologists, consultant urology surgeons, and histopathologists. It cites pressure from increasingly complex cancer reporting and the evolving field of geonomics on histopathology, and demand from cancer patients on urology.
- 1.32 The Royal College of Radiologists describes shortfalls of 34% and 12% in the radiology and clinical oncology workforces, likely to deteriorate to 38% and 28% respectively by 2028<sup>38</sup>. We also heard that there are shortages of medical physicists, specialist and district nurses, and in the geonomics, Systemic Anti-Cancer Therapy and radiotherapy workforce.
- 1.33 HEIW set out its plans to address workforce shortages in its Education and Training Plan and Integrated Medium-Term Plan 2024-27. In line with its commitment in the Cancer Improvement Plan, HEIW has published its workforce plans for pharmacy and for geonomics, and intends to publish its plan for nursing in early 2025. The Ten-Year Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care 2020 sets out the broader strategic approach.
- 1.34 As well as sufficient staff, NHS Wales needs sufficient equipment to deliver timely and effective diagnosis and treatment. The NHS Executive is building up a picture of capacity associated with the age and availability diagnostic imaging equipment including the age and availability of equipment. We heard anecdotal evidence that Wales has fewer imaging machines than comparable countries, and that some machines are old and prone to breaking down. Whilst it was beyond the scope of this review examine those claims, we did hear that limitations in access to diagnostic equipment are putting pressure on staff, affecting recruitment and retention, and restricting HEIW's ability to offer training places for diagnostic students<sup>39</sup>.

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36 Audit Wales, Workforce Data Briefing, 2023, sets out broad workforce issues, with many affecting services for cancer patients where services are not specific to cancer patients (such as diagnostics and surgery).

37 The Plan sets out commissioning and training recommendations for the health professional workforce in Wales.

38 Royal College of Radiologists, Radiology Workforce Census 2023, June 2024.

39 It is exploring using simulated training environment as an alternative.



**Strategic direction**



02

- 2.1 This part of the report looks at national strategic direction and leadership to improve cancer care in Wales. **Appendix 1** explains key elements of the strategic approach and broad roles and responsibilities for cancer services.

### What we looked for

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We looked for evidence of a clear strategic direction for improving cancer outcomes and services, and for reducing demand for cancer services by preventing cancer occurring in the first place. We also looked for evidence of appropriate and clear leadership structures to direct, oversee and support improvement and tackle barriers at a national level.

## There is a lack of clarity on the status of the Cancer Improvement Plan and how it aligns with other cancer improvement initiatives

### **The Cancer Improvement Plan has not been sufficiently integrated into the wider strategic approach for improving cancer services**

- 2.2 The Welsh Government set out its vision of what ‘good’ cancer services should look like in the Quality Statement for Cancer (2021). The Statement is generally high-level but is underpinned by tumour specific national optimal pathways. The pathways set out what should happen at different stages of the patient journey according to professional guidance. The Welsh Government instructed health boards to start embedding the pathways by September 2022<sup>40</sup>. When it published the Statement, the Welsh Government said that the Cancer Network would develop a rolling, three-year plan to achieve the national vision.

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40 Via Welsh Health Circular (2022) (021).

## Exhibit 17: vision set out in the Quality Statement for Cancer

The Cancer Quality Statement sets out that its ultimate aim is to improve population survival and reduce cancer mortality rates. It identifies key areas for action:

- that cancer is effectively prevented where possible,
- that cases of cancer are detected at earlier more treatable stages,
- that complex treatment pathways are optimised, while throughout people are properly supported and co-produce their care.

The statement sets out a series of attributes, indicating what good quality care looks like, under six headings:

- Equitable
- Safe
- Effective
- Efficient
- Person centred
- Timely

Source: Welsh Government Quality Statement for Cancer, 2021.

2.3 In 2023, the Network published A Cancer Improvement Plan for Wales 2023-26 (the Plan) at the request of then Minister for Health and Social Services. The Plan encompasses a broad range of cross-sector actions to improve cancer patient outcomes and reduce health inequalities. It's three year horizon was deliberately aligned to local health board planning cycles. However, this means the Plan lacks focus on longer-term actions to build sustainable cancer services. It also lacks detail on prevention, palliative and end-of-life care, and on services for children and young people and does not cover the full range of ambitions in the Quality Statement.



- 2.4 The then Minister used the Plan to set the new expectation that by March 2026, 80% of patients would start their first treatment within 62 days. The Minister announced publication of the Plan in an oral statement, describing it as a collective NHS Wales approach to delivering the policy intentions in the Quality Statement for Cancer. The Welsh Government told us that it is not a Welsh Government Plan. It considers that it does not require a national plan to implement the Quality Statement because health boards and trusts are responsible for implementing the vision through their own local plans.
- 2.5 Nonetheless, the Plan exists at the request of the Minister and many of its actions require national direction and leadership to support successful implementation. This would include consideration of the funding needed to support the Plan's actions and using national planning and performance management frameworks to clarify requirements around the Plan's delivery (**recommendation 1**).
- 2.6 The Cancer Improvement Plan commits the Welsh Government to monitoring delivery of the Plan through its existing performance arrangements. However, during our fieldwork, Welsh Government officials told us that such monitoring was not taking place. Since then, at the then Minister's request, the Cancer Network has collated a retrospective progress 'update' on delivery of the Plan. However, the Welsh Government is not routinely monitoring implementation in line with its commitment in the Cancer Improvement Plan.

### **New national initiatives to improve cancer services have merit but stakeholders are confused about how they link to the Cancer Improvement Plan**

- 2.7 Since publication of the Plan in 2023, the Welsh Government and NHS Executive have set up new programmes aiming to improve cancer services (**Exhibit 18**). While there are merits in each programme, stakeholders are unclear about how they align with the Cancer Improvement Plan.

**Exhibit 18: new programmes to improve cancer services**

<b>Programme</b>	<b>Description</b>
Cancer: Improving Outcomes initiative	The Welsh Government commissioned Life Science Hub Wales to develop the initiative, which is aimed at focusing innovation on key problem areas and removing the barriers to delivering innovation at pace.
National Cancer Recovery Programme	The NHS Executive set up the programme, which is aimed at reducing long waits to achieve a target that 80% of suspected cancer patients start treatment within 62 days by 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2026.

Source: Audit Wales.

- 2.8 The NHS Executive is currently finalising arrangements for its National Cancer Recovery Programme. The Programme focuses on five specific tumour sites<sup>41</sup> with some cross-cutting actions to improve more general services to diagnose and treat cancer patients. Rather than large-scale, whole-system transformation, the Programme aims to improve performance and improve compliance with the National Optimal Pathways within existing budgets.
- 2.9 The Welsh Government has repurposed Cancer Network funding to provide £2 million per annum for 2024-25 to 2026-27 for the NHS Executive to implement the Programme. Around half of this funding will pay for staff costs in line with the Programme aims around encouraging improvement within existing budgets. NHS Executive officials told us that the Programme may identify improvement opportunities which would then be costed and developed into business cases for additional Welsh Government funding.

<sup>41</sup> Breast, gynaecological, lower gastrointestinal, skin, and urological cancers.

## **Many NHS bodies and third sector partners are confused about the strategic direction**

- 2.10 NHS and third sector organisations told us they are confused about the strategic direction for cancer services in Wales. Some all-Wales NHS bodies have embraced the commitments in the Plan (for example paragraph 1.33). Others have rejected actions attributed to their organisation and saw some actions in the Plan as irrelevant (for example paragraph 2.37).
- 2.11 Health boards have developed local initiatives to improve diagnosis, treatment and support for cancer patients but it is not clear how they link to the Cancer Improvement Plan. During our fieldwork it was apparent that NHS bodies were not clear about the status of the Plan and how it should be shaping their activities. NHS and third sector bodies told us that the development of the new initiatives and programmes so soon after the publication of the Cancer Improvement Plan has increased their confusion about the strategic direction.

## National leadership, decision-making and oversight arrangements are not effective and there is an over-reliance on narrow performance management

### **There is a lack of clarity as to who is responsible and accountable for driving system wide improvement to cancer services**

2.12 The Welsh Government established the NHS Executive to drive improvements in the quality and safety of care. It brings together existing improvement organisations to better coordinate and drive improvements to the quality and safety of care<sup>42</sup>. However, officials in NHS bodies and third sector representatives we interviewed, were confused about the differing roles of the Welsh Government and NHS Executive. We also heard that there was confusion about the different roles and functions within the NHS Executive. At the time of our review, three NHS Executive functions had responsibility for driving cancer improvement:

- the Strategic Planned Care Programme had responsibility for supporting improvement in the timeliness of cancer diagnosis and treatment;
- the Performance Assurance Directorate provided direct support to NHS bodies to improve cancer performance; and
- the Cancer Network worked with clinicians, health professionals, and third sector and patient representative organisations to improve outcomes and care for cancer patients.

2.13 We found a general consensus, including within the Welsh Government and NHS Executive, that the Executive is not yet providing the intended strong leadership to drive improvement. Many NHS and third sector bodies described arrangements after the establishment of the Executive as a 'step backwards' or 'worse than ever.'

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42 The NHS Wales Delivery Unit, the NHS Wales Finance Delivery Unit, the NHS Wales Health Collaborative; and Improvement Cymru.

2.14 Stakeholders raised various concerns about the national leadership and accountability arrangements for cancer services including:

- the Cancer Network lacking the authority to make decisions and commit the level of resources needed to secure change;
- lack of integration of the Cancer Network within the NHS Executive's leadership and with the wider NHS, and gaps in arrangements to share frontline insight from clinicians;
- third sector bodies are struggling to know who to engage with and how to share important intelligence and more generally feeling under-appreciated for the extensive support they provide to the system<sup>43</sup> and individuals and their families (**recommendation 2**);
- overlap and duplication between the cancer recovery work carried out by the Strategic Planned Care Programme and the intervention work led by the Performance Assurance Directorate; and
- lack of communication between the Welsh Government and NHS Executive to assess whether funding for additional capacity is being allocated to areas of greatest need.

2.15 Since our fieldwork the NHS Executive has established a Network Clinical Leadership Group to support closer working between clinicians and wider NHS Executive senior leadership. Whilst this is a positive development, wider action is needed to strengthen national leadership arrangements. The gaps, lack of clarity and duplication described above have led to a situation where many stakeholders from inside and outside of the NHS told us: 'we don't know who is in charge' (**recommendation 2**). The Senedd Health and Social Care Committee's report on gynaecological cancers<sup>44</sup> raised similar concerns and called on the Welsh Government to be 'more accountable' for driving improved cancer services.

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43 The third sector has a wealth of knowledge and insight and provides funding for some services in Wales (such as the Teenage Cancer Trust cancer ward in Cardiff). We also found examples of third sector organisations attracting private sector funding to drive innovation, and developing data resources which are now used by NHS Wales.

44 Welsh Health and Social Care Committee, Unheard: Women's Journey through Gynaecological Cancer, December 2023.

## **National decision-making and leadership arrangements are not sufficiently robust to systematically identify and prioritise opportunities to improve cancer services**

- 2.16 Cancer treatment is an area of significant innovation, with opportunities to improve outcomes and efficiency. We identified examples of Welsh Government investment and decision making to improve cancer and planned care. For instance, it has worked with health boards and the NHS Executive to introduce rapid diagnostic centres; supported improvements to the bowel screening programme and is funding a new cancer centre for Velindre NHS Trust<sup>45</sup>.
- 2.17 However, the Welsh Government recognises that it lacks a robust approach to identifying, assessing and prioritising such opportunities. Current arrangements need strengthening to ensure there is sufficient capacity to assess and prioritise initiatives for funding. Arrangements should address gaps in decision making structures to prioritise investment in areas such as digital, workforce and diagnostics (**recommendation 2**). **Exhibit 19** sets out two areas of opportunity to improve efficiency and outcomes, where decision making has been slow.

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<sup>45</sup> We are conducting a separate examination of decision-making relating to the development of the new Velindre Cancer Centre. We aim to publish that report in 2025.

**Exhibit 19: potential innovations where decision making has been slow**

Programme	Description
<b>Digital cellular pathology</b>	<p data-bbox="355 465 1342 842">During our review, NHS bodies and third sector organisations cited frustration with the speed of national decision making on the use of digital cellular pathology. Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board was a pioneer of the approach and transformed its pathology service in 2014. Laboratories could scan and upload images onto digital systems to be analysed remotely rather than transporting samples between locations. Alongside a broader transformation programme*, the approach dramatically improved the timeliness of pathology results and helped the health board recruit and retain staff because it facilitated flexible working arrangements.</p> <p data-bbox="355 864 1342 1395">The National Pathology Programme has been working with the Welsh Government and health boards to develop a consistent all-Wales approach to digital cellular pathology since 2019. Despite general consensus on the benefits of the approach, progress has been restricted by uncertainty about who would fund modern scanning equipment and digital storage. Health boards have been reluctant to commit funds without clarity on the Welsh Government’s financial contribution. Despite investing in other aspects of digital cellular pathology, at the time of our review, the Welsh Government was not clear about whether it would fund the equipment and storage to establish an all-Wales approach. The National Pathology Programme was still working with health boards to agree a business case share ongoing annual costs of around £3 million for the scanning equipment and storage.</p> <p data-bbox="355 1417 1342 1527">Wales now lags behind the rest of the UK for digital cellular pathology capacity, making it a less attractive employment option for newly qualified pathologists in an already competitive market.</p>

Programme	Description
<b>Lung Screening</b>	<p>In 2019, the Cancer Network started exploring evidence on the effectiveness lung screening. It concluded that screening could increase the percentage of cancers identified at an early stage and had the potential to reduce lung cancer mortality by 20%. The work informed a pilot lung health check programme in Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board, which started in 2022 and was funded by third sector organisations and private industry.</p> <p>The UK National Screening Committee recommended that UK nations develop targeted lung screening for people aged 55-74 years with a history of smoking in June 2022. Despite an endorsement from the Wales Screening Committee in November 2022, the Welsh Government did not task PHW with developing options for a national programme until July 2023. The Welsh Government has asked PHW to provide interim proposals on a national lung screening programme by May 2025. If PHW meets the 2025 deadline, it will have taken three years from the UK National Screening Committee’s recommendation just to develop interim proposals. Finalising proposals and implementing a national programme would take more time after this point (<b>recommendation 5</b>).</p>

Source: Audit Wales.

Note: \*The digital cellular pathology approach was part of a wider transformation programme including combining regional services into a single Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board Cellular Pathology Service.

2.18 We also heard concerns about the Welsh Government’s ability to secure the benefits from its investment in capacity and new ways of working. In particular, stakeholders frequently cited an incoherent approach that has seen the Welsh Government invest in the training and recruitment of radiologists only for many to be unable to find work in NHS Wales (**Exhibit 20**).



## Exhibit 20: investment in training and radiologists

A National Imaging Academy opened in 2019, as a result of the Welsh Government providing £3.4 million to HEIW to establish the facility to help meet identified workforce gaps in respect of radiologists and imaging professionals.

However, many of the newly qualified radiologists are leaving Wales because, despite workforce gaps there are no jobs for them. Some health boards told us that financial pressures have led to recruitment freezes which limited their ability to recruit diagnostic staff. We also heard that weaknesses in health board workforce planning including projections of future need and slow recruitment processes were part of the problem\*.

The NHS Executive's National Diagnostics Implementation Plan\*\* contains a weak commitment to work with HEIW to 'advocate' for commitment to employment from health boards when requesting training numbers. It is unclear what role the Welsh Government intends to play in ensuring the benefits of its investment in training the future workforce are not lost to Wales (**recommendation 7**).

Source: Audit Wales

Notes:

\* Our review of workforce planning made specific recommendations to health boards to improve workforce planning. Individual reports for each NHS body are available on our website [www.Audit.Wales](http://www.Audit.Wales).

\*\* NHS Executive, National Diagnostic Implementation Plan 2023-25.

2.19 Regional working across health board areas can help to share capacity and bolster fragile services. Health boards are developing regional approaches in some areas that can increase capacity in the system<sup>46</sup>. The NHS Executive is also developing plans for two regional diagnostic hubs in South Wales to provide additional shared diagnostic capacity for the region. However, the overall pace of regional collaboration is slow. Whilst there is a clear onus on health boards to take forward regional working, there is also a need for national leadership and co-ordination from the Welsh Government and the NHS Executive. In that regard the recent creation of a dedicated senior role within the NHS Executive to support regional working is a welcome development. However, success will also depend on action to tackle barriers to regional working such as a lack of integration between digital systems making it difficult to share waiting lists across health boards<sup>47</sup> (**recommendation 6**).

## **Welsh Government oversight is narrowly focussed on the 62-day target**

2.20 The Welsh Government's NHS Performance Framework (2024-25) sets out the measures (but not the targets) against which NHS bodies are accountable. The 62-day measure is the main cancer specific measure. There is a measure on the timeliness of colonoscopy for bowel screening referrals (**paragraph 1.21**) but no measures for breast or cervical screening referrals. Previous performance frameworks<sup>48</sup> included coverage measures for all three cancer screening programmes. There is also a measure for uptake of the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine (**paragraph 2.24**).

2.21 The Performance Framework does not include any measures on cancer incidence, mortality and survival rates. It does not clearly link to the six quality attributes set out in the Quality Statement for Cancer and the Framework makes no reference to compliance with the National Optimal Pathways that underpin the Quality Statement. While the Welsh Government has made the NHS Executive responsible for monitoring compliance with the pathways it is still developing methods for doing so.

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46 Including developing regional approaches to diagnostics and treatment in North, Southeast and Southwest Wales using Welsh Government planned care recovery funding.

47 Welsh Health and Social Care Committee, Unheard: Women's Journey through Gynaecological Cancer, December 2023.

48 NHS Wales Performance Framework 2022-23.

2.22 There is a well-established framework for oversight of NHS bodies' planning and performance through activities such as scrutiny of NHS bodies' annual or medium-term plans, monthly Integrated Quality, Planning and Delivery meetings and twice yearly Joint Executive Team meetings between Welsh Government, the NHS Executive and individual NHS bodies. In addition, monthly cancer performance meetings provide a specific focus on the diagnosis and treatment of cancer patients. Collectively this represents a significant volume of performance management activity and includes positive developments around collaboration and information sharing between the Welsh Government and NHS Executive. However, the focus is largely on short-term delivery of the 62-day cancer performance target, rather than broader system change and wider delivery of the vision in the Quality Statement (**recommendation 3**).

## The strategic approach lacks a coherent focus on cancer prevention, and is undermined by gaps in data and fragmented digital services

### **There is no coherent strategic approach to prevention, even though many cancers are preventable and doing so could save lives and reduce demand for NHS services**

2.23 The Cancer Improvement Plan states that 38% of cancers each year in Wales are preventable. There are considerable opportunities to tackle lifestyle factors which increase the risks of some cancers. Many of the lifestyle risk factors for cancer are similar across major conditions accounting for the majority of planned and emergency care in the UK. Data from PHW's Public Health Outcomes Framework<sup>49</sup> showed that in 2022-23, 13% of adults in Wales smoked; 17% drank more alcohol than recommended guidelines<sup>50</sup>; and only 36% of working age adults were a healthy weight<sup>51</sup>.

2.24 There are also opportunities associated with increasing the uptake of the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine. Since its introduction in 2008, the vaccine has reduced cancer rates by almost 90% in women in their 20s and is expected to save hundreds of lives a year in the UK<sup>52</sup>. PHW reported that 74% of children in school year 9 during 2023-24 had the vaccine. There was considerable variation in uptake ranging from 60% in Cardiff and Vale University Health Board to 88% in Swansea Bay. Changes in eligibility for the vaccine make it difficult to compare changes in uptake over time<sup>53</sup>.

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49 Public Health Wales NHS Trust Observatory, Public Health Outcomes Framework.

50 Based on adults who reported drinking over 14 units of alcohol per week.

51 Smoking and alcohol consumption data uses age standardised rates to account for differences in age structures of different parts of Wales. Data on healthy weight is age specific.

52 Public Health Wales NHS Trust: immunisation and vaccines.

53 Public Health Wales, Vaccine Uptake in Children in Wales, Quarterly Report January to March 2024, May 2024.

- 2.25 The World Health Organisation states that prevention offers the most cost-effective long-term strategy for managing cancer<sup>54</sup>. The Welsh Government's Science Evidence Advice<sup>55</sup> agrees that there are considerable opportunities to reduce the burden of disease on the NHS by preventing cancer and other major conditions. It identifies scope for long-term financial savings and calls for 'drastic action' to address increases in lifestyle risk factors, making many suggestions to reshape services around prevention.
- 2.26 The Welsh Government's NHS Planning Framework 2024-27 refers health boards to the Science Evidence Advice, explaining that it expects to see evidence of prevention in health boards plans. However, the Welsh Government does not go further in encouraging and leading health boards to develop local preventative initiatives.
- 2.27 Preventing cancer would also reduce demand on NHS capacity. **Exhibit 21** sets in crude terms what impact a 10%, 20% and 38% reduction in cancer cases could have, based on 2022-23 activity levels. The potential annual financial savings from the reduction in bed days would be in the order of £8.2 million to £31.4 million<sup>56</sup>. There could also be significant savings from reducing outpatient appointments and drugs costs. However, there would also be costs associated with activity to prevent cancer.








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54 World Health Organisation, Health Topics – Cancer Prevention.

55 Welsh Government, Science Evidence Advice – NHS in 10+ Years – An Examination of the Projected Impact of Long-Term Conditions and Risk Factors in Wales', September 2023.

56 Savings calculation based on £500 per day cost of an NHS bed in Wales.

## Exhibit 21: potential capacity gains associated with preventing cancer occurring in the first place based on 2022-23 activity

				
<b>2022-23</b>	<b>90,532</b> finished consultant episodes	<b>84,583</b> admission episodes	<b>164,971</b> bed days	<b>10,864</b> regular attenders*
<b>-10%</b> 	<b>81,479</b> finished consultant episodes (9,053 reduction)	<b>76,125</b> admission episodes (8,458 reduction)	<b>148,474</b> bed days (16,497 reduction)	<b>9,778</b> regular attenders (1,086 reduction)
<b>-20%</b> 	<b>72,426</b> finished consultant episodes (18,106 reduction)	<b>67,666</b> admission episodes (16,917 reduction)	<b>131,977</b> bed days (32,994 reduction)	<b>8,691</b> regular attenders (2,173 reduction)
<b>-38%</b> 	<b>56,130</b> finished consultant episodes (34,402 reduction)	<b>52,441</b> admission episodes (32,142 reduction)	<b>102,282</b> bed days (62,689 reduction)	<b>6,736</b> regular attenders (4,128 reduction)

Source: Audit Wales analysis of DHCW data from the Patient Episode Database for Wales, Headline Figures and Primary Diagnosis Datasets, Welsh Providers

Note:

\*Our analysis is indicative of potential capacity gains based on averages. We calculated potential gains associated with a 38% reduction in activity based on the assertion in the Cancer Improvement Plan that 38% of cancers each year are preventable.

\*Regular attenders are patients who are admitted to hospital on a regular basis to receive treatment.

- 2.28 Despite compelling evidence and it being a long-standing ambition, the Welsh Government has yet to translate broader aims on prevention into more concrete and cohesive policy approaches aimed at shifting the balance of care towards prevention (**recommendation 4**). In particular:
- it has never set out a clear, over-arching strategic approach to achieving this shift across the many public sector bodies whose priorities, choices and behaviours would need to change;
  - it has a piecemeal approach with individual strategies on healthy weight and tobacco control<sup>57</sup> but no plan related to the health impacts of alcohol use; and
  - the Future Generations Commissioner, amongst others, criticised the Welsh Government for cutting its preventative health improvement budgets in 2024-25<sup>58</sup>.

### **There are gaps in the availability and quality of data to understand how well cancer care is being provided**

- 2.29 Good quality data is essential for the planning, delivery and improvement of cancer care. The NHS Executive has improved the timeliness and accessibility of performance data in an unpublished interactive dashboard used by health boards, the Executive, and the Welsh Government. DHCW publishes a different Suspected Cancer Pathway Dashboard with less detailed information<sup>59</sup>.
- 2.30 However, there are gaps in published data right across the patient pathway (**Exhibit 22**). The Welsh Government publishes data on 'closed' pathways showing how many patients were treated within 62 days but does not publish 'open' pathway waits to show how many patients are currently waiting for treatment.
- 2.31 Much of the available data focusses narrowly on the period between referral and diagnosis or first treatment. There is no national data on the activity and timeliness leading up to a referral. There is also no available data on activity after the first treatment starts (see **paragraph 1.6**), including follow-up tests, ongoing treatment and access to palliative and end-of-life care (**recommendation 9**).

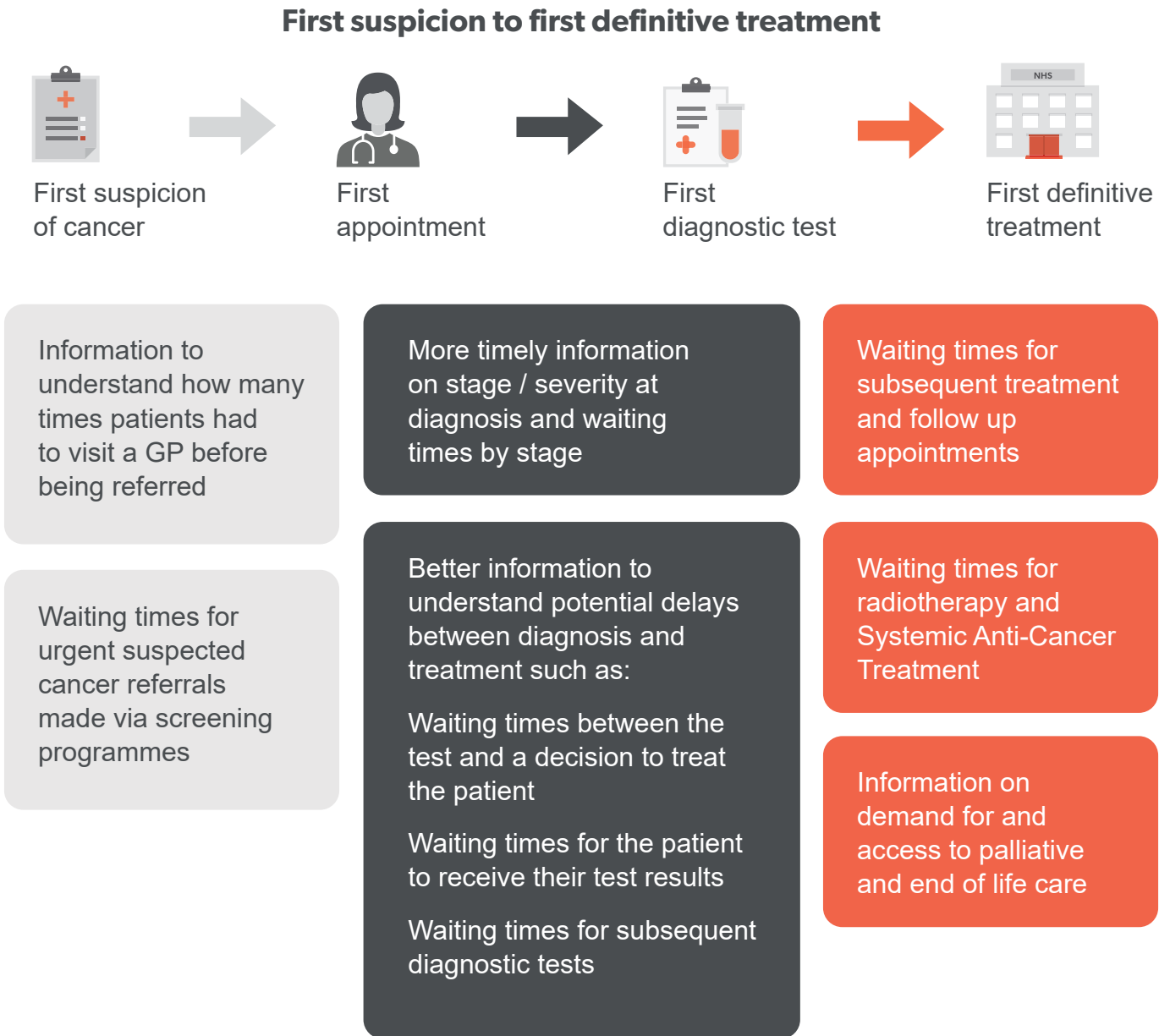
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57 Welsh Government, Healthy Weight Healthy Wales, 2019 and Welsh Government, A Smoke Free Wales – Our Long-term Tobacco Control Strategy, 2022.

58 The budget for health improvement and healthy living reduced by £3.8 million bringing the total budget to £10.8 million; the substance misuse action plan fund by £2.5 million bringing the total budget to £47.5 million); and the health promotion budget fell by £710,000 to £12.2 million.

59 DHCW's dashboard uses data which has been validated to identify errors but the internal NHS Executive dashboard is unvalidated performance data.

### Exhibit 22: gaps in data at different stages of the cancer pathway



Source: Audit Wales



2.32 There is very limited data to track progress against the ambitions in the Quality Statement. Against the overarching ambition of prevention and early detection, we found limited information on the causes of growing demand that can be used to prevent or detect cancer early amongst those most at risk. For instance, little is known about why some people are presenting at a more advanced stage, or as an emergency. There is also limited information about the demographic profile and location of people with unhealthy lifestyles. A new project led by WCISU has the potential to improve national intelligence on cancer risk factors. It will link Cancer Registry data to Census 2021 information via the SAIL databank to explore the influence of factors like ethnicity, income and educational status on cancer outcomes<sup>60</sup>.

2.33 There is also very limited information to understand how equitable cancer support services are. For example:

- the Welsh Government requires health boards to record the ethnicity of cancer patients<sup>61</sup> but compliance is extremely low. We were unable to analyse waiting list and timeliness trends by ethnicity because over two thirds of the pathways had no information on patient ethnicity.
- DHCW reports performance against the 62-day target by sex but there is little information to understand patient experience and outcomes by sex. The Senedd inquiry into gynaecological cancers found that women can experience many barriers to accessing cancer treatment but there is little information to understand how many women are affected<sup>62</sup>.
- there is insufficient public data to understand potential differences in the timeliness of cancer diagnosis and treatment across Wales, particularly for people living in Powys. Timeliness data for Powys residents treated by other Welsh health boards is included in data for those health boards. The data is not disaggregated to show timeliness for Powys residents or the residents of the health board providing treatment<sup>63</sup>. There is also a lack of data on Welsh patients from any health board who are treated by NHS England (**recommendation 10**).
- there is also little information to understand equity of provision for children and young people. DHCW groups all data for under 30-year-olds together in the Suspected Cancer Dashboard data whereas other patients are grouped ten-year age bands. Under 16-year-olds are excluded from the Macmillan cancer patient experience survey.

60 The project aims to report its findings in late 2024.

61 Under Data Standards Change Notices from 2020 onwards (DCSN 2020/21 and DSCN 23/45). The Notices mandate compliance with data standards.

62 Welsh Parliament Health and Social Care Committee, Unheard: Women's Journey Through Gynaecological Cancer, December 2023.

63 Other published NHS Wales data does include distinct health board 'residence' and 'provider' performance data. For instance the Referral for Treatment data on StatsWales.

2.34 There are problems with the quality of some of the available data. WCISU officials told us Wales is a year behind England in publishing Cancer Registry data because a high volume of errors in the source data is creating extra work for its staff. NHS bodies told us that poor compliance with data standards by NHS staff inputting patient information is creating data errors. We found that there is confusion around who is responsible for improving compliance (**recommendation 8**). We have not specifically reviewed data quality as part of this review but have uncovered several inaccuracies in published data and bespoke analysis provided by DHCW.

## **Digital systems are fragmented and progress implementing the new cancer information system has been slow**

- 2.35 Progress in updating the core digital system for cancer patients has been extremely slow. The previous system (Canisc) was constructed using a programming language in 1997 which Microsoft stopped supporting in 2014. Following our 2018 report on NHS Wales informatics systems<sup>64</sup>, the Senedd Public Accounts Committee inquiry raised serious concerns about slow progress replacing Canisc<sup>65</sup>. It took a further five years to implement the first phase of the new cancer information system. DHCW told us that the pandemic has added to delays. The Welsh Government has recently confirmed funding for the second phase of the programme, aimed at improving integration and digital processes and dealing with requests for specific changes from individual NHS bodies.
- 2.36 More broadly, NHS bodies told us that lack of integrated digital systems is consuming valuable staff time because they are using manual 'workarounds' to transfer patients across the different patient administration systems. The process is frustrating staff and diverting their time from seeing patients. It also carries risks to patient safety because details could be transferred incorrectly or not at all. DHCW is responsible for delivering national digital systems for NHS Wales but not their local configuration. DHCW described considerable barriers to getting those systems to join up. In particular, there are numerous examples of NHS bodies either procuring their own digital systems rather than using the national products, or adapting the national products which limits interoperability.
- 2.37 The Cancer Improvement Plan committed PHW, the Cancer Network and DHCW to developing a cancer version of the national Digital and Data Strategy for Wales by the end of June 2023. No such plan had been created at the time of our review and we found confusion about the commitment to create one in the first place. DHCW told us there is no need to create a separate digital cancer plan because the overarching Digital and Data Strategy sets out the system wide approach to improve digital provision.

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64 Wales Audit Office, Informatics Systems in NHS Wales, 2018.

65 National Assembly for Wales Public Accounts Committee, Informatics Systems in NHS Wales, 2018.



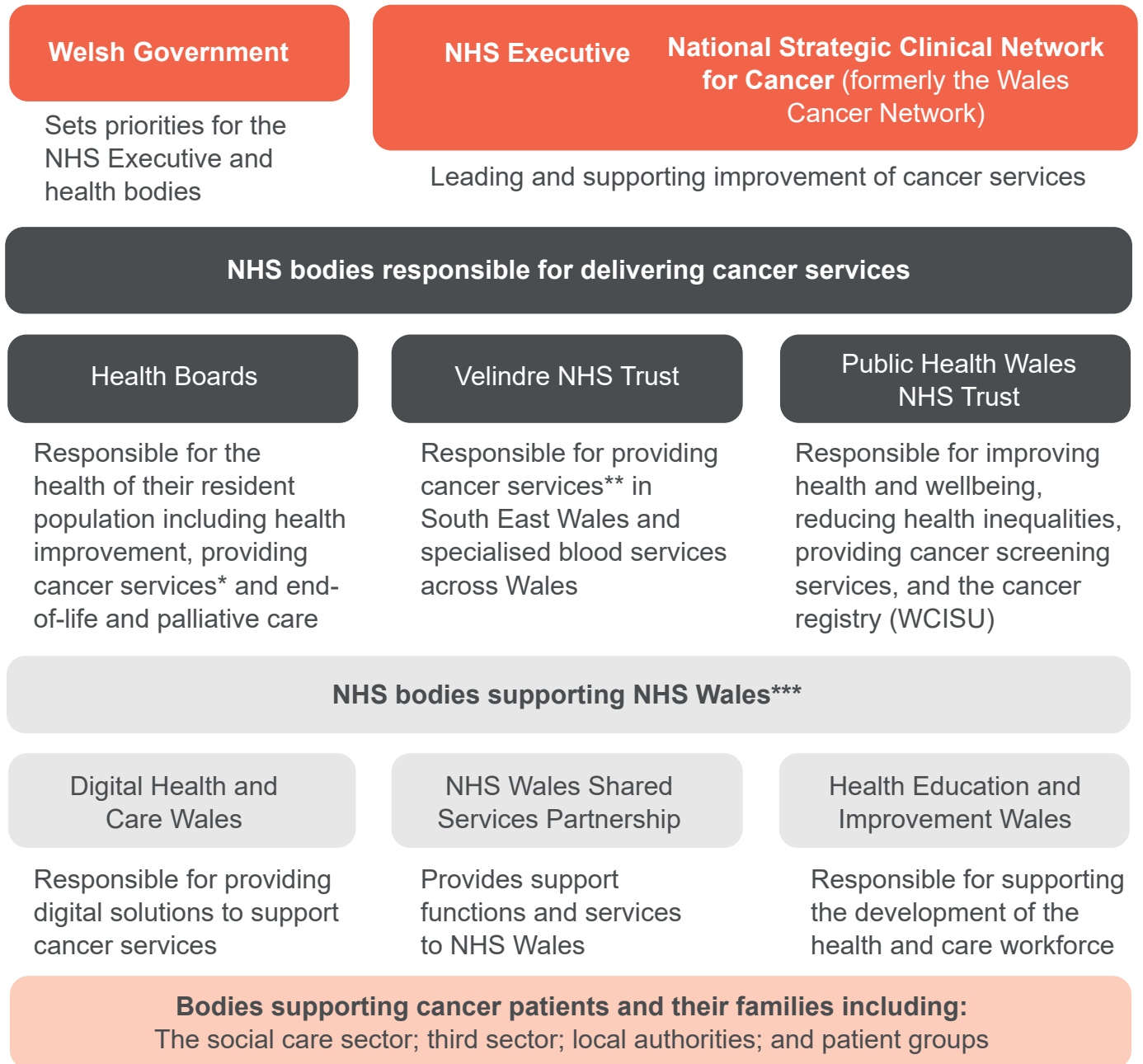
# Appendices

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- 1 Strategic context
- 2 Additional data analysis
- 3 About our work

# 1 Strategic context

## Exhibit 23: broad roles and responsibilities for cancer services in Wales



Source: Audit Wales

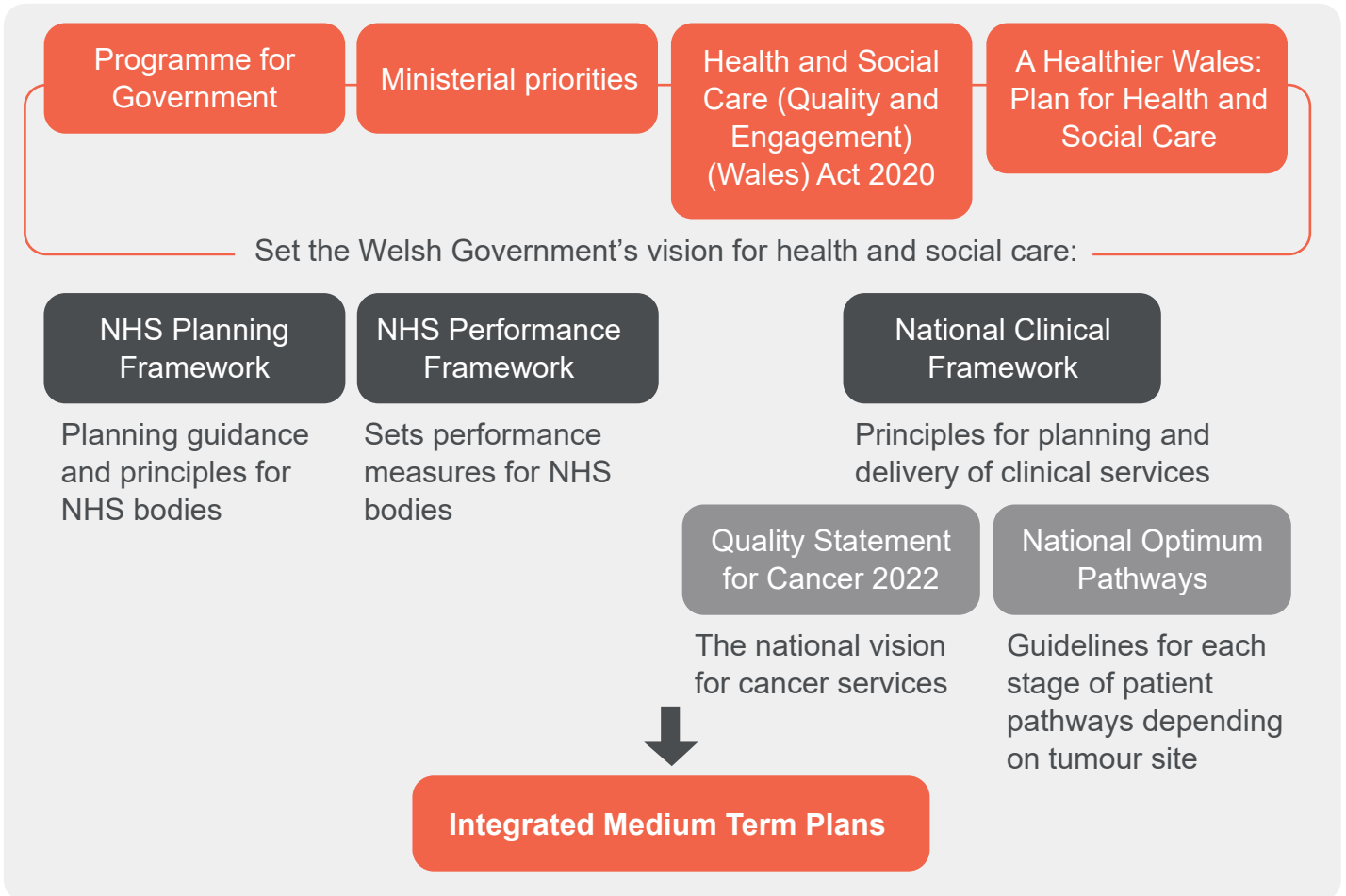
Note:

\*Including diagnostic tests; treatment; and support and advice for patients. The level and type of services provided differs between health boards because some services are provided by other healthcare providers. For instance, Powys Teaching Health Board provides some diagnostic services but commissions other cancer services from other NHS providers in England and Wales.

\*\*Including chemotherapy; radiotherapy; and support and advice for patients.

\*\*\*There are also organisations and groups responsible for research, development and innovation including: Geonomics Partnership Wales; Health and Care Research Wales; Life Sciences Hub Wales; and the Wales Cancer Research Centre.

**Exhibit 24: key elements of the strategic approach to cancer services in Wales**



**Wales Cancer Network: Cancer Improvement Plan 2023**  
 A collective plan for NHS Wales to improve services for cancer patients

**NHS Executive: National Cancer Recovery Programme 2024**  
 National programme to improve cancer services

**Life Sciences Hub Wales: Cancer: Improving Outcomes Initiative**  
 A Welsh Government commissioned programme, aimed at delivering innovation at pace.

**Broader Welsh Government Strategy including:**

- Diagnostics, Recovery and Transformation Strategy for Wales 2023-25
- Digital and Data Strategy for Health and Social Care in Wales 2023
- National Workforce Implementation Plan: Addressing NHS Wales Workforce Challenges 2023 and A Healthier Wales: Our Workforce Strategy for the Health and Social Care Workforce, 2020 (commissioned by the Welsh Government from Health Education and Improvement Wales)
- Healthy Weight, Healthy Wales, 2019 including a 2022 to 2024 delivery plan
- A smoke-free Wales: Long-term tobacco control strategy, 2022 including a 2022 to 2024 delivery plan

## 2 Additional data analysis

### Data on demand for cancer services

**Exhibit 25: Patients who were treated by source of suspicion, monthly average across 2023-24**

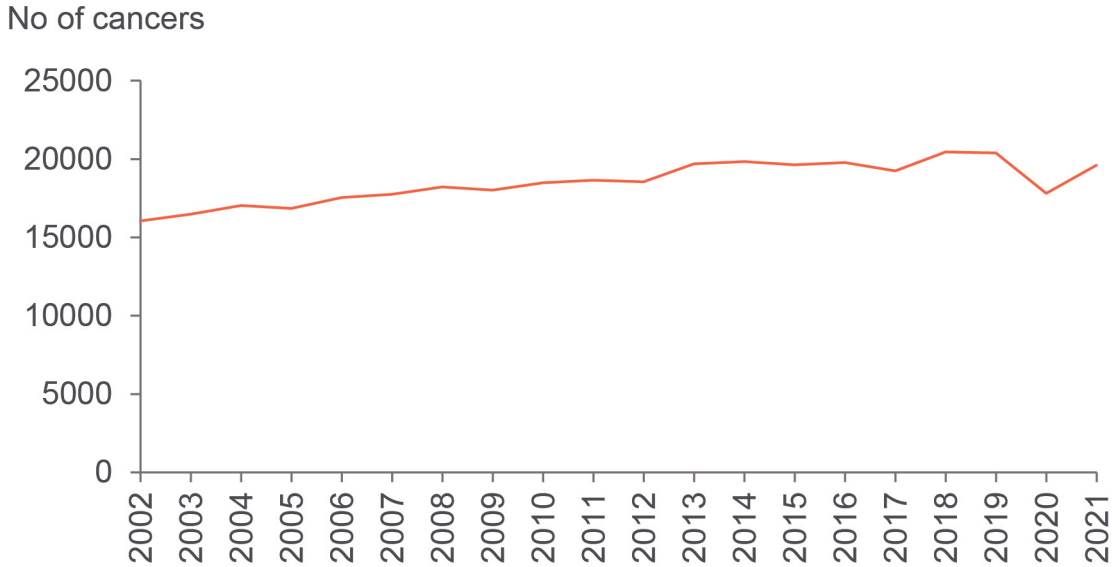
Source of suspicion / referral	% overall suspected cancer referrals	% of patients starting treatment as a proportion of referrals by source of suspicion
GP	80% (12,635 people)	8% of GP referrals (975 people)
Internal secondary care	10% (1,570 people)	17% of internal secondary care referrals (266 people)
Following a diagnostic test	6% (911 people)	37% of referrals following a diagnostic test (341 people)
Bowel screening	1% (120 people)	28% of bowel screening referrals (33 people)
Breast screening	1% (106 people)	92% of breast screening referrals (98 people)
Cervical screening	<1%*	50% of cervical screening referrals*
Emergency department	1% (214 people)	38% of emergency department referrals (81 people)
Other primary care professional	1% (120 people)	5% of referrals from other primary care professionals*
Other health professional	<1% (66 people)	15% of referrals from other health professionals*
Consultant from another health board	<1% (38 people)	21% of referrals from external consultants*

Source: Audit Wales analysis of DHCW Suspected Cancer Pathway Data – closed pathways by source of suspicion.

Note: A small number of patient pathways did not have data on the source of suspicion / referral.

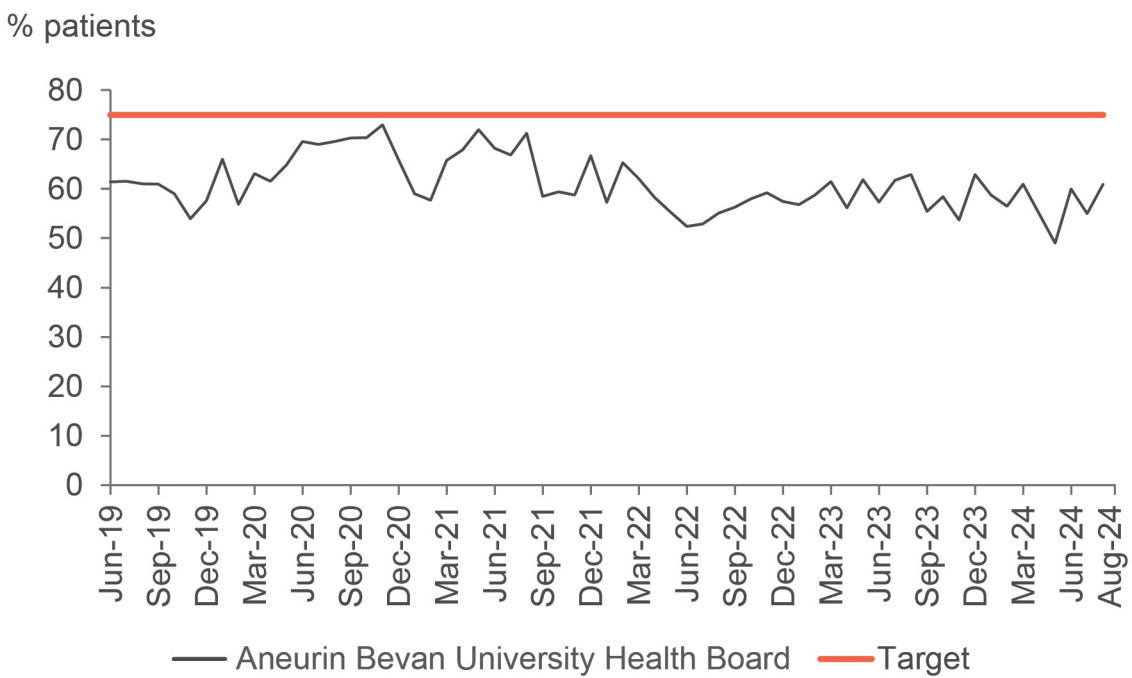
\*Where there are 10 people or less.

**Exhibit 26: number of newly diagnosed cancers in Wales (excluding non-melanoma skin cancer), 2002-2021**



Source: WCISU cancer incidence data

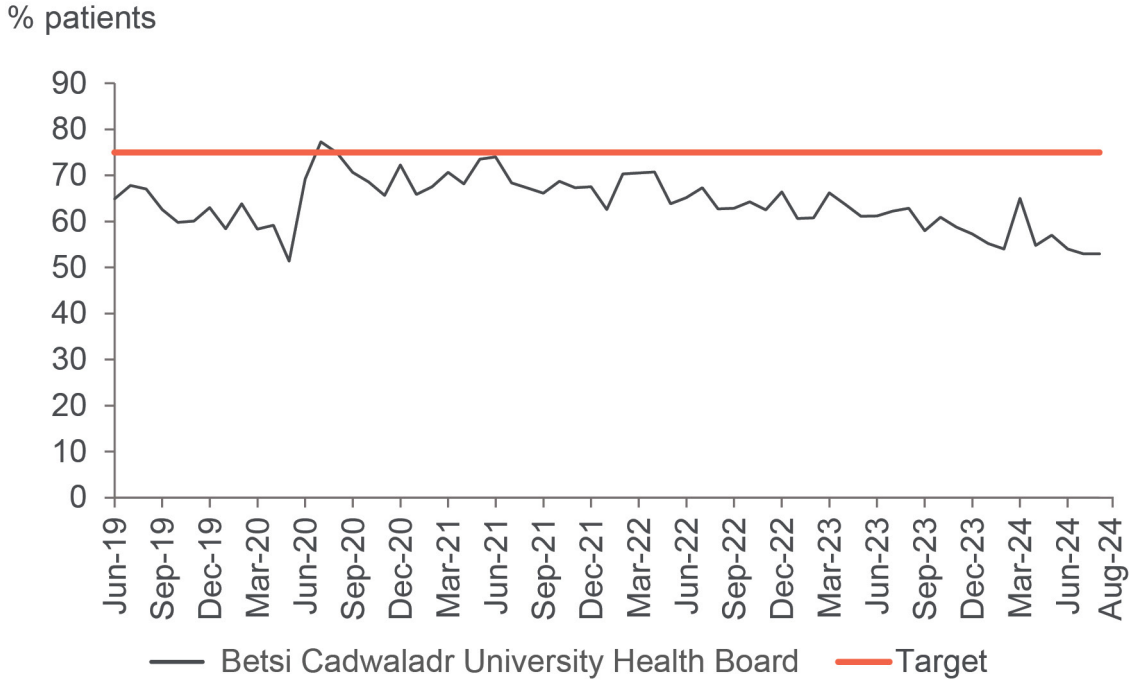
**Exhibit 27a: performance against the 62-day target by Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, June 2019 to August 2024**



Source: DHCW, Suspected Cancer Pathway – Closed Pathways dataset, on StatsWales.

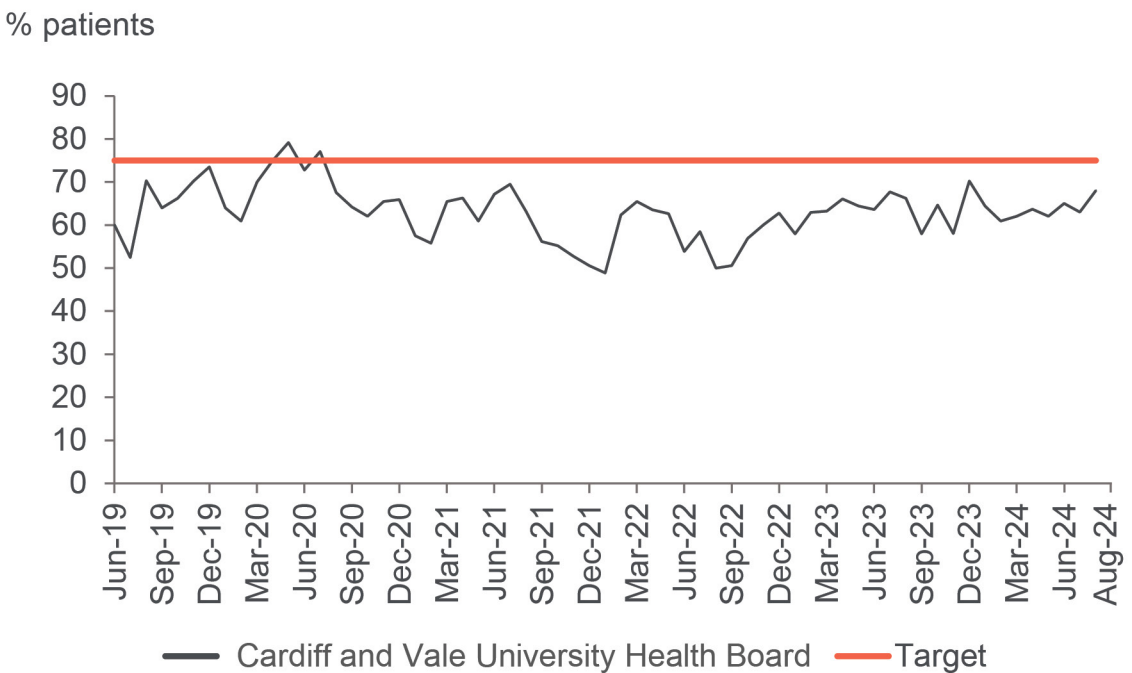


### Exhibit 27b: performance against the 62-day target by Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, June 2019 to August 2024



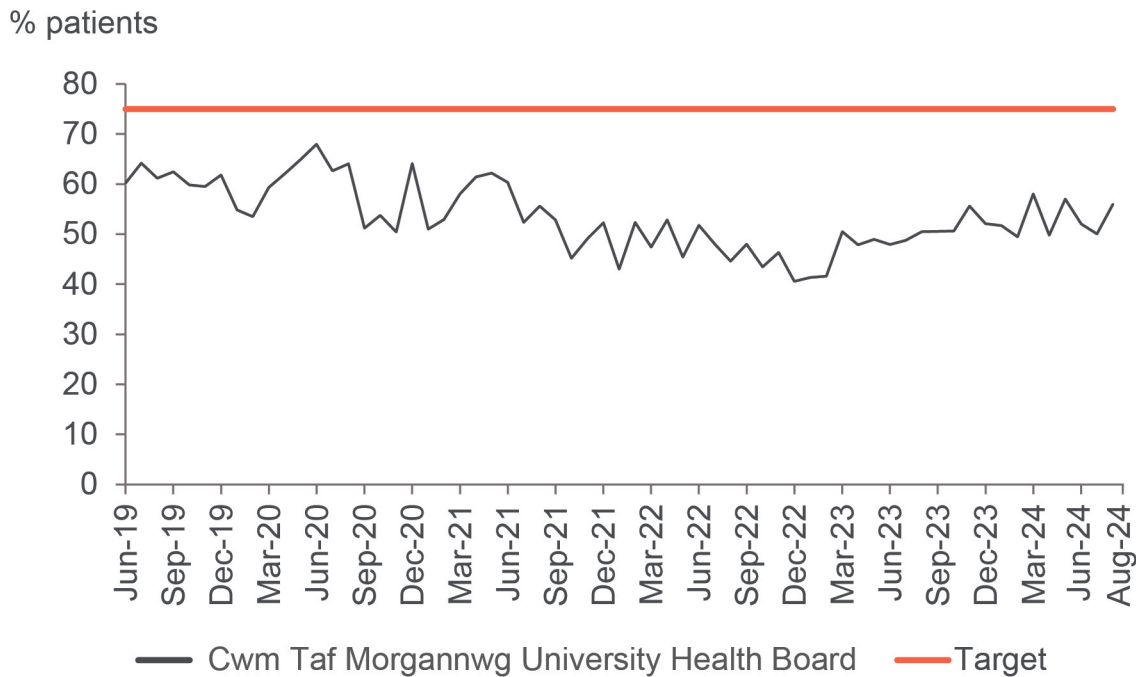
Source: DHCW, Suspected Cancer Pathway – Closed Pathways, on StatsWales.

### Exhibit 27c: performance against the 62-day target by Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, June 2019 to August 2024



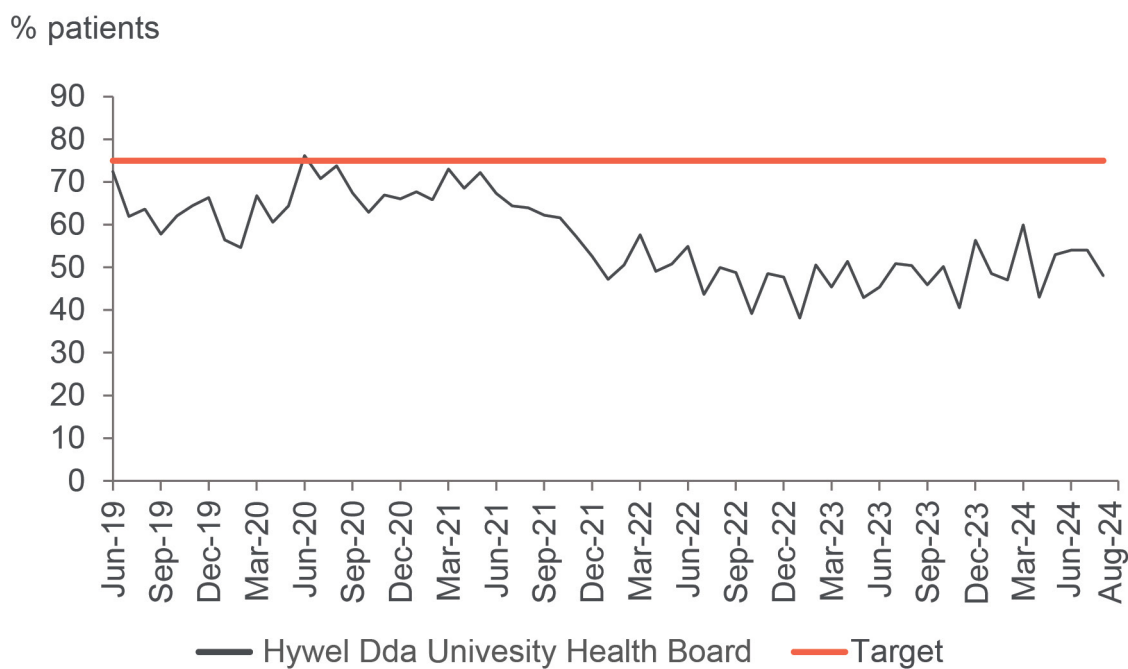
Source: DHCW, Suspected Cancer Pathway – Closed Pathways dataset, On StatsWales.

**Exhibit 27d: performance against the 62-day target by Cwm Taf Bro Morgannwg University Health Board, June 2019 to August 2024**



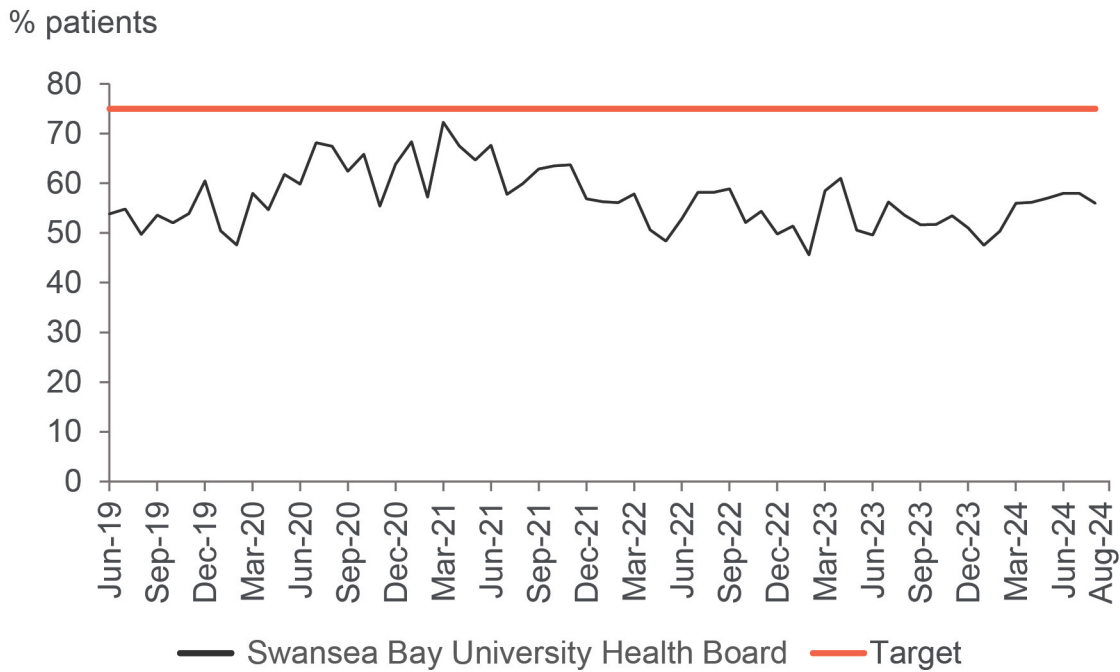
Source: DHCW, Suspected Cancer Pathway – Closed Pathways dataset, on StatsWales.

**Exhibit 27e: performance against the 62-day target by Hywel Dda University Health Board, June 2019 to August 2024**



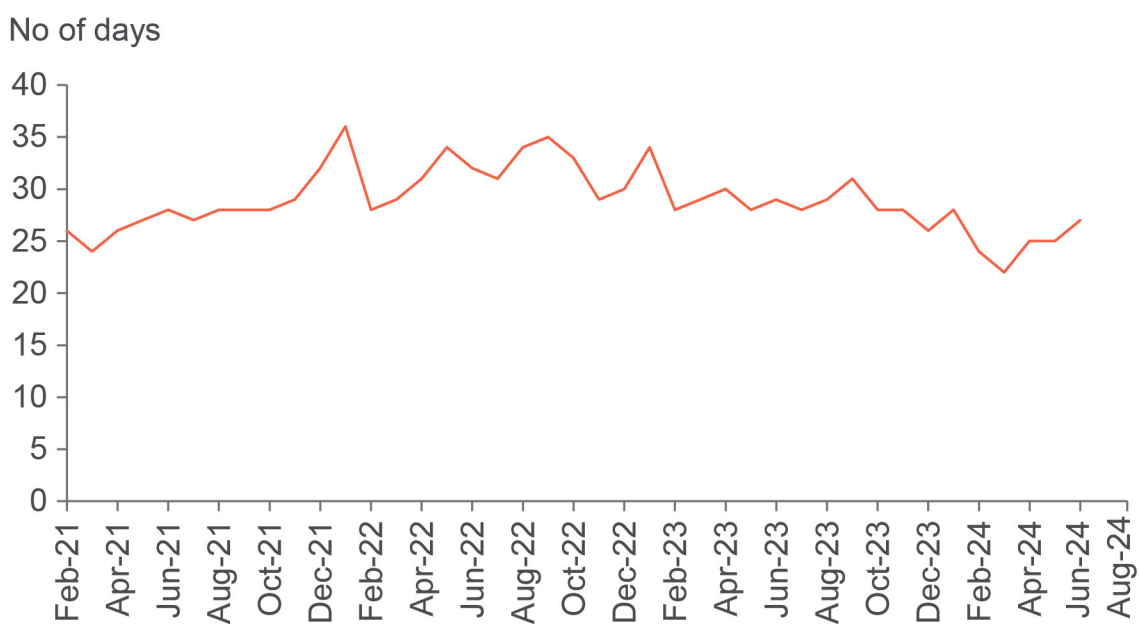
Source: DHCW, Suspected Cancer Pathway – Closed Pathways dataset, on StatsWales.

**Exhibit 27f: performance against the 62-day target by Swansea Bay University Health Board, June 2019 to August 2024**



Source: DHCW, Suspected Cancer Pathway – Closed Pathways dataset, on StatsWales.

**Exhibit 28: median waits from first suspicion to diagnosis, February 2021 to August 2024**



Source: DHCW data from the Suspected Cancer Pathway Dashboard

## 3 About our work

### Audit question, scope and criteria

We chose to focus on the national strategic approach to improving the timeliness of cancer diagnosis and treatment because we identified significant systemic challenges facing cancer services during our scoping. This review focuses on the Welsh Government and NHS Executive (and its National Strategic Clinical Network for Cancer) as system leaders, recognising that health boards and trusts have responsibility for the operational delivery of different aspects of cancer services. We will consider the merits of further work focusing on NHS bodies' approach to delivering cancer services in our 2025-26 work programme.

We developed our audit criteria based on learning from our previous audits of planned care<sup>66</sup> and local health audit work, analysis of key strategic documents<sup>67</sup>, and research from relevant organisations on the challenges associated with cancer services in Wales.

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66 Audit Wales, NHS Wales Waiting Times for Elective Care in Wales, 2015; Audit Wales, 10 Opportunities for Resetting and Restarting the NHS Planned Care System, 2020; and Audit Wales, Tackling the Planned Care Backlog in Wales, 2022.

67 Including Welsh Government, A Healthier Wales – a Long Term Plan for Health and Social Care, 2021; Welsh Government, Our Programme for Transforming and Modernising Planned Care and Reducing Waiting Lists in Wales, 2022, Welsh Government, The Quality Statement for Cancer, 2022, Welsh Government, Diagnostics Recovery and Transformation Strategy for Wales 2023 to 2025; and the National Strategic Clinical Network for Cancer, A Cancer Improvement Plan for NHS Wales 2023-26, 2023.

## Audit methods

### Document review

We reviewed relevant documentation including:

- documents setting out the national strategic approach. Key documents include the Quality Statement for Cancer, Cancer Improvement Plan, the Diagnostic Recovery and Transformation Strategy, National Clinical Framework, National Optimal Pathways and NHS planning and performance frameworks
- documents relating to the NHS Executive's national cancer recovery programme
- individual NHS body plans setting out their approach to delivering cancer services, and relevant board and committee papers on cancer performance
- papers from the Welsh Government's performance management meetings
- Public Health Wales NHS Trust information on the delivery of population screening services information on cancer data and population health including reports from the Welsh Cancer Surveillance and Intelligence Unit and the Welsh Government's Science Evidence Advice<sup>68</sup>
- the Senedd Health and Social Care Committee's report on its inquiry on gynaecological cancers<sup>69</sup> and supporting evidence

### Semi-structured interviews

We interviewed officials from the following organisations:

- the Welsh Government;
- the NHS Executive including its National Strategic Clinical Network for Cancer;
- a sample of health boards including officials from Betsi Cadwaladr, Hywel Dda and Swansea Bay University Health Boards, and Powys Teach Health Board;
- officials from other NHS bodies including Digital Health and Care Wales, Health Education and Improvement Wales, Public Health Wales and Velindre NHS Trusts; and
- we also met with officials from the NHS Executive, Cardiff and Vale, Hywel Dda and Swansea Bay University Health Boards to inform our scoping.

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68 Welsh Government, Science Evidence Advice – NHS in 10+ Years – An Examination of the Projected Impact of Long-Term Conditions and Risk Factors in Wales', September 2023.

69 Welsh Parliament Health and Social Care Committee, Unheard: Women's Journey Through Gynaecological Cancer, December 2023.

## Workshop with third sector representatives

We held a workshop with representatives from the third sector on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2024 organised by the Wales Cancer Alliance<sup>70</sup>. We asked participants for their views of the strengths and weaknesses of the national strategic approach and invited further written responses with more detail on the same topic. We conducted follow-up interviews with some organisations for clarification where necessary. Representatives from the organisations below took part in the workshop:

- ALK Positive UK
- Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry
- Blood Cancer UK
- Bowel Cancer UK
- Breast Cancer Now
- Cancer Research UK
- Fair Treatment for the Women of Wales
- Leukaemia Care
- MacMillan Cancer Support
- Marie Curie
- Prostate Cancer UK
- Royal College of Pathologists
- Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
- Royal College of Physicians
- Tenovus Cancer Care
- Young Lives vs Cancer
- We established an expert panel to inform our understanding of the systemic barriers to the timeliness of cancer diagnosis and treatment and provide critical challenge on our findings. The panel included representatives from Marie Curie, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, the Royal College of Physicians, and the Wales Cancer Alliance.

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70 A coalition of charities working to prevent cancer, improve care, fund research and influence policy in Wales.

## Data analysis

We reviewed data from different sources including:

- DHCW published data on open and closed cancer pathways, on StatsWales;
- DHCW published data on hospital admissions. We also requested data on discharge destinations of cancer patients admitted to hospital;
- we requested data from the Suspected Cancer Pathway dataset managed by DHCW that is not published elsewhere. We analysed data on performance against the Suspected Cancer Pathway target by ethnicity; source of suspicion ; and closed pathways by whether patients started treatment for cancer, were downgraded for not having cancer, or died before being downgraded or starting treatment; and
- Welsh Cancer Surveillance and Intelligence Unit data on cancer incidence, mortality and survival.



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We welcome correspondence and telephone calls in Welsh and English.

Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth a galwadau ffôn yn Gymraeg a Saesneg.