

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE2045](#): “Lower the cervical cancer smear test age in Scotland to 16”, lodged by Tiffany Maguire

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

[PE2045](#) calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to lower the cervical screening test age to 16. The petitioner underwent her first cervical screening test at age 26 and was found to have Grade 2 [cervical intraepithelial neoplasia](#) (CIN2) cell abnormalities in her cervix. Her treatment has so far been unsuccessful. The petitioner expressed that had her request for a cervical screening test following the birth of her children been granted, the cell abnormalities may have been discovered earlier.

Current cervical screening provision

Cervical screening is currently [routinely offered in Scotland](#) on a five-yearly basis between the ages of 25 and 64. In Scotland, Wales, and England, [HPV primary screening](#) is used to test the sample taken from a patient’s cervix. The test screens for the presence of the human papilloma virus (HPV) in the cervix, as the virus [causes 99.8% of cervical cancers](#).

The sample is first tested for high-risk HPV, as this form of the virus can cause cervical cell changes that may lead to cervical cancer over time. If high-risk HPV is detected, the same sample will be tested for cell changes. If HPV and/or cell changes are detected, patients will be offered [further testing and treatment](#) as clinically appropriate. The [presence of cell abnormalities](#) does not mean that a patient has cervical cancer; however, some types of cell abnormalities [indicate an increased risk](#) of developing cervical cancer in the future.

Potential implications of lowering minimum age for cervical screening test

Cervical cancer is rare in under-25s, representing [less than 1% of cases](#). The [incidence rates of cervical cancer](#) rise sharply from age 25-29, and peak in the 30-34 age group. As Cancer Research UK notes, this pattern reflects the diagnosis of prevalent cases at initial routine screening, the prevention of a high proportion of incident cases during subsequent screenings, and the likely peak of HPV exposure in early adulthood.

Cervical screening programs [commonly begin at age 25](#) in many countries, including the UK, France, Germany, and Australia. The [European Union](#)

[guidelines](#) advise commencing cervical screening at age 30, and the [World Health Organisation recommends](#) that cervical screening begins by age 35.

Organisations including [Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust](#) advise that the risks of conducting cervical screening tests for under-25s may outweigh the benefits, as it is common for those in this age group to experience changes in the cells of the cervix which resolve by themselves. If these changes were detected by a cervical screening test, the patient may be offered unnecessary treatment which could lead to complications, including an increased risk of premature birth in future pregnancies.

Though cervical cancer is rare in under-25s, [Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust](#) promotes awareness of [the symptoms of cervical cancer](#) among all age groups. Anyone experiencing these symptoms, regardless of age, is encouraged to contact their GP. NHS Scotland's [cancer referral guidelines](#) state that a patient with "clinical features (vaginal discharge, postmenopausal, postcoital or persistent intermenstrual bleeding) and abnormality suggestive of cervical cancer on examination of the cervix" should be urgently referred for cancer investigation.

It is anticipated that cervical cancer incidence rates in younger age groups will [decrease in the coming years](#), due to the introduction of [the HPV vaccine](#). The HPV vaccine [has been routinely offered](#) to S1 pupils in Scotland since 2008, which means that the first cohort of pupils who were offered the vaccine are now over the age of 25. [Public Health Scotland reported](#) that the vaccine has reduced the rate of cancer-causing HPV by 90%. However, vaccination [does not protect against all subtypes of HPV](#), and vaccinated people who are eligible for cervical screening are therefore still advised to attend appointments. The [World Health Organisation recommends](#) that vaccination and screening are used together as part of a comprehensive approach to cervical cancer control.

Scottish Government actions

Gail Ross MSP lodged [written question S5W-21676](#) on 14 February 2019, asking the Scottish Government in what circumstances a woman aged (a) under 25 and (b) over 65 can request an NHS smear test. The then-Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing, Joe FitzPatrick MSP, replied that women outwith the cervical screening age range cannot self-refer for a cervical screening test, as the evidence suggests that the risks outweigh any potential benefits. The Minister clarified that the cervical screening test is not a test for cancer, and that if a patient presents with symptoms of cervical cancer, they should be referred for diagnostic testing regardless of age.

Scottish Parliament actions

There has been no Scottish Parliament action on this topic to date.

UK Parliament actions

A [petition was lodged](#) with the UK Parliament regarding the lowering of the cervical screening age to 16 in 2020. The UK Government's response to the petition stated that the current minimum age of 25 reflects the evidence that conducting cervical screening before the age of 25 can do more harm than good, and encouraged awareness of the symptoms of cervical cancer at all ages. The petition was closed in February 2021.

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27 September 2023

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

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