



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Russell George MS
Chair
Health and Social Care Committee
Welsh Parliament

30 August 2022

Dear Russell,

Thank you for your letter of 8 July 2022 regarding progress made towards achieving elimination of hepatitis C in Wales.

The attached document provides an update on the recommendations made in the Fifth Senedd Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's report on progress towards achieving elimination, as well as responses to the other specific issues that you raise.

Please pass on my thanks to the Committee for their continued interest in this important matter.

Your sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M. E. Morgan'.

Eluned Morgan AS/MS

**Y Gweinidog Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol
Minister for Health and Social Services**

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

Written response by the Welsh Government to the Health and Social Care Committee's request for an update on progress towards achieving elimination of hepatitis C in Wales

- 1. Please provide an update on the implementation of each recommendation, including actions that have been taken, any planned actions, and, where appropriate, details of associated resourcing, planned timescales, and how the impact and outcomes of actions and spend have been (or will be) evaluated and measured.**

***Recommendation 1.** We recommend that the Welsh Government produces a comprehensive national elimination strategy for hepatitis C, with clear ambitious targets, and workforce planning built in, and provides sustainable funding until elimination is achieved. This must be done as a matter of urgency, given that the current plan will end this year, and funding for dedicated posts is only confirmed until 2021.*

The Welsh Government committed to producing periodic Welsh Health Circulars for NHS Wales outlining progress and highlighting specific actions necessary to eliminate hepatitis C by 2030 at the latest. We stated that performance against these requirements (including targets) would be scrutinised and monitored through existing NHS performance management arrangements. The response to the pandemic has been our top priority and has naturally required the redirection of resources both within Welsh Government and within our NHS. I recognise the need to reinvigorate the drive to eliminate hepatitis C as our services recover and adapt to meet the challenges faced by two years of the pandemic.

It is our intention to set out our expectations including priority actions and targets for the NHS and Area Planning Boards in communications this autumn. The central funding available to support the drive to eliminate hepatitis C will be clearly set out.

***Recommendation 2.** The strategy must include a targeted awareness raising campaign to reach out to at risk communities and also provide for education and training for health professionals.*

We fully accept that investment in effective and sustained outreach services to engage with individuals not currently in contact with traditional services is fundamental to progress. Our extensive efforts to protect the homeless and rough sleepers during the coronavirus pandemic included targeted awareness raising and funding for the introduction of the Hepatitis C Trust 'Follow Me' support programme is beginning to strengthen the peer support network in Wales. Strengthening targeted case finding in the community and the vital role of peer support will be a key aspect of our communication to services in the autumn.

Education and training for health professionals is already generally available and will be further supported through the development of a quality statement for liver disease, which will include a continuing focus on meeting our targets to eliminate hepatitis C. The quality statement will set out our expectation for clinical services by describing the outcomes and standards we expect to see in high quality, patient focussed services.

Recommendation 3. *The Welsh Government must write to Local Health Board Finance Directors and Chief Executives to emphasise that national treatment targets for hepatitis C must be considered as minimum targets, to be exceeded wherever possible, if the elimination target of 2030 is to be achieved in Wales.*

The Welsh Health Circular planned for communication to NHS Chief Executives and Finance Directors this autumn will emphasise that any specified targets must be considered as minimum targets, to be exceeded wherever possible.

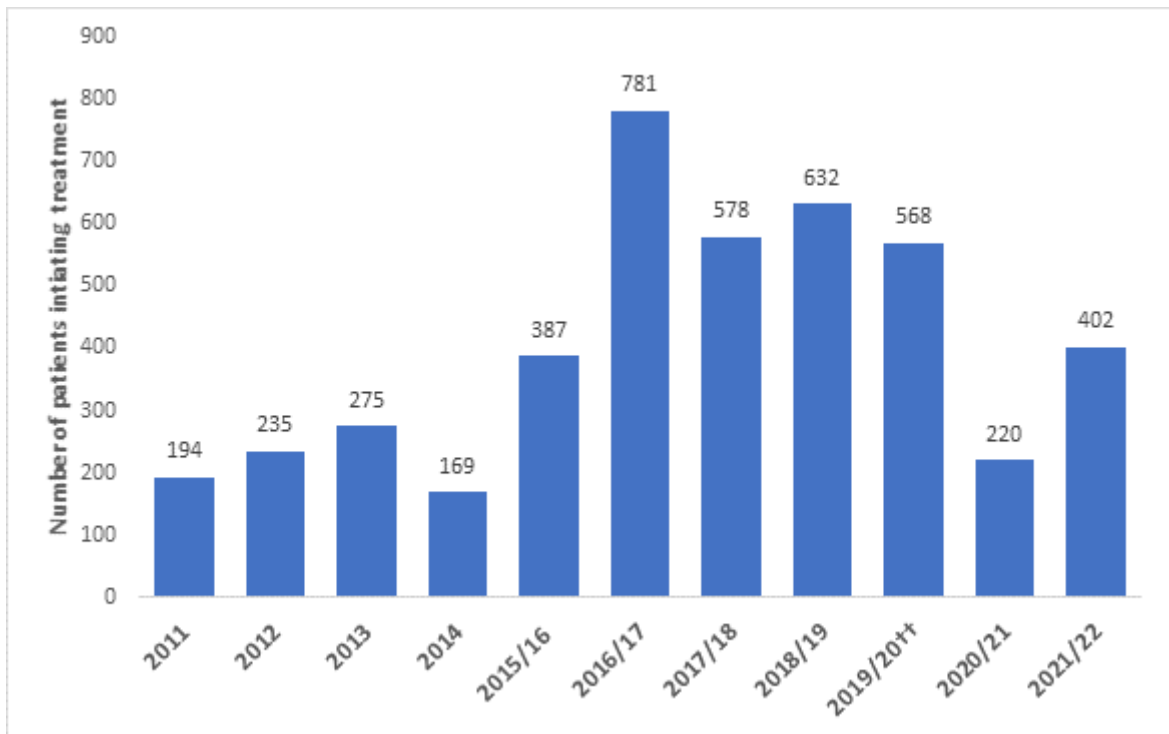
Recommendation 4. *We recommend that the Welsh Government provides additional investment to improve Hepatitis C testing in Welsh prisons.*

The Welsh Government has allocated additional funding to improve hepatitis C testing in prisons, with £231,000 in revenue funding provided in 2020/2021 to support testing consumables, along with £57,000 in capital funding in 2021/2022 for additional testing machines.

Opt-out testing has been rolled out across the prison estate in Wales since 2016, and is continually being monitored. Prior to the pandemic, figures for opt-out testing were increasing in a sustained manner. Despite the impact the pandemic had on testing in Welsh prisons, there has been a significant increase in testing coverage since 2020. During 2021 a coverage rate of 50.1% was achieved in comparison to 30.9% in the previous year. Testing coverage has nearly been restored to pre-pandemic levels, where a coverage rate of 56.6% was achieved in 2019.

2. Please provide information and data on treatment initiations since 2020.

You will see from the graph below that treatment initiations naturally dropped in 2020/21 but made a strong recovery in 2021/22 despite the challenges we have faced.



3. Please provide an update on the Blood-Borne Virus Recovery Strategy and any accompanying wider Welsh Government support.

National workshops were held in October last year and again in May this year to support health boards to develop and review their recovery plans and to consider whether:

- elimination was on track in each area,
- services in each area had been fully mapped and a gap analysis carried out for targeted intervention,
- all relevant services were engaged in elimination,
- they were sufficiently resourced for elimination, and
- what other crucial next steps were required.

Nationally, the Welsh Government has continued to fund a range of co-ordination posts through the work of the Liver Disease Implementation Group and through this funding the following progress has been made:

- testing for BBVs in prisons has been supported with the aim of achieving elimination in our prison settings,
- piloting access to rapid testing in community pharmacies,
- piloting peer support workers in the community to improve testing uptake and linkage to treatment,
- phase 2 of the Hepatitis C Re-engagement Programme has commenced to reach out to those who historically tested positive but who do not appear to have engaged in treatment.

- 4. Please confirm the Welsh Government's target for elimination (and whether there are any plans for a more ambitious target in line with the other nations), and whether the Welsh Government is confident it will meet its target.**

The Welsh Government remains committed to eliminating hepatitis C by 2030 at the latest. While we do not rule out bringing the target date forward in the future, realistically, the current target of elimination by 2030 is already very stretching.