

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE2062](#): ‘Introduce a National Screening Programme for Prostate Cancer’, lodged by Bill Alexander

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

[PE2062](#) calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce a national screening programme for prostate cancer. The petitioner acknowledges the risks of screening for prostate cancer, but states that patients should be able to make an informed choice about whether they wish to access screening.

Prostate cancer prevalence, symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment in Scotland

Prostate cancer is the fourth most common type of cancer in Scotland, and the most common form of cancer in men. According to Public Health Scotland’s [most recent report on cancer incidence in Scotland](#), there were 4,265 diagnoses of prostate cancer in the year ending December 2021, representing 12.1% of all cancer cases in Scotland. This represents an increase of 10% since 2019. As [Cancer Research UK notes](#), survival rates for prostate cancer are generally high, particularly if the disease is diagnosed early.

Prostate cancer usually develops slowly, and can be present without symptoms for many years. [Symptoms often only appear](#) when the prostate becomes large enough to impact the urethra. This increased pressure on the urethra can cause symptoms including an increased need to urinate, a feeling that the bladder has not completely emptied, and straining when urinating.

There is no one test used to diagnose prostate cancer. However, some of the most common tests include a prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test, a physical examination of the prostate, and a biopsy. The PSA blood test can help to diagnose some prostate cancers; however, the test [carries potential disadvantages](#) as it can miss prostate cancer in some patients, and may falsely diagnose others, leading to unnecessary tests and treatment.

[Treatment for prostate cancer](#) depends on factors including the stage of the cancer, and the age of the patient. Watchful waiting and active surveillance can be recommended if the cancer is unlikely to affect the patient’s natural lifespan. In cases where treatment is required, options include radiotherapy, hormone therapy, and surgery to remove the prostate.

Benefits and disadvantages of prostate cancer screening programmes

Routine screening for prostate-specific antigen (PSA) levels is [a controversial topic](#) in the medical community. The [PSA test can be unreliable](#) in prostate cancer screening and diagnosis as it does not specifically test for cancer. A person's PSA level can be raised for multiple reasons, including urinary tract infections and inflammation of the prostate. Using the PSA test to screen for prostate cancer could therefore lead to some men undergoing unnecessary biopsies and treatment, although most men are now [offered an MRI scan](#) before a biopsy to avoid unnecessary invasive testing.

A [2023 review of evidence](#) conducted by Prostate Cancer UK suggested that advancements in MRI technology and biopsy techniques could facilitate the development of a national screening programme for prostate cancer. The review found that the referral of patients for multiparametric MRI scans following the detection of a high level of PSA in their blood [resulted in a 64% decrease](#) in the number of unnecessary biopsies conducted.

Scottish Government actions

The petitioner noted that they had contacted the Scottish Government, and been advised that the Scottish Government currently has no plans to introduce a screening programme.

In [its response to the petition](#), dated 29 November 2023, the Scottish Government stated that it follows the advice of the UK National Screening Committee (UKNSC) with regard to screening for health conditions. The UKNSC [does not currently recommend population screening for prostate cancer](#), as the PSA test cannot accurately identify prostate cancer that requires treatment. The test can falsely diagnose prostate cancer in some men, and miss cancer in others. As the Scottish Government noted in its submission, population screening for prostate cancer using the PSA test may also detect cancer that would not have caused a patient any health problems during their lifetime. This could cause inadvertent harm to a patient, as they may undergo unnecessary tests and treatments.

The Scottish Government's response also acknowledged that the UKNSC is due to conduct a review of its prostate cancer screening recommendations, and confirmed that the Scottish Screening Committee will advise Ministers regarding any new recommendations emerging from this review.

Scottish Parliament actions

There has been no recent Scottish Parliament action concerning this topic.

Sarah Swift
Researcher

29 January 2024

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
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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