



Marie Rimmer CBE, MP
Member of Parliament for St. Helens
South & Whiston
House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA
Tel: 020 7219 4847/01744 752075

Breast Cancer Awareness Month:

October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, which provides an important opportunity to raise the profile of breast cancer with policymakers, health professionals and the wider public, as well as supporting those who are affected by this devastating disease.

I pay tribute to health charities who are involved in fundraising and promoting awareness, including Breast Cancer Now's 'Wear it Pink' campaign, which is one of the biggest fundraising events in the UK.

One of the biggest actions we can take to improve cancer survival is to diagnose cancer earlier. That means increasing the number of diagnosticians, improving public awareness, maximising the number of cancers identified through screening, and ensuring GPs have the training, resources and support they need to identify symptoms and refer patients quickly.

But our health service is under considerable pressure. Despite the incredible efforts of staff, cancer referral and treatment targets are repeatedly missed and NHS waiting lists have risen to over seven million – the highest ever on record.

The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee report into NHS backlogs finds that waiting times for cancer are “at their worst recorded level”. Estimates suggest there could be more than 27,000 people on the waiting list with undiagnosed cancers. For breast cancer, the target is that 93% of women should be seen by a specialist within two weeks following urgent referral; it currently stands at 72%.

Ministers point to the impact of COVID. But we entered the pandemic with record waiting lists and 100,000 staff vacancies.

In my view, we must build an NHS fit for the future - providing it with the staff, technology, resources, and reform it needs - to improve breast cancer pathways and ensure all patients get the support they need.

I support a 10-year plan of reform and modernisation, harnessing technology to fight disease and transform the way we deliver care to diagnose and treat cancers sooner. In the short term, we must utilise spare capacity in the independent sector to drive down waiting lists, while ensuring long term reform of our NHS to make it fit for the future: shifting the focus to early diagnosis and intervention.

Taken together, the plan will ensure that 75% of all cancers are diagnosed earlier, at stages one or two, and improve survival rates by hitting all NHS cancer targets within five years, so no patient waits longer than they should.

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Constituency Office:

Marie Rimmer CBE, MP, 2nd Floor, Century House, Hardshaw Street, St. Helens WA10 1QU, 01744 752075,
marie.rimmer.mp@parliament.uk
Website: www.marierimmer.co.uk