



DEBATE PACK

Number CDP-0013, 24 January 2019

E-petition 225767 on the age for cervical cancer smear tests

By Manjit Gheera
Carl Baker
Alexander Bellis
Michael O'Donnell
Frances Little

Summary

On 28 January 2019 there will be a debate prompted by e-petition 225767.

[E-petition 225767](#) reads as follows:

Hi I'm Natasha, I am making this petition because I want to make a difference to all woman living in the UK.

I am 30 years old and I have metastatic cervical cancer. I believe that the age of screening should be lowered to age 18 to enable all woman to detect cell changes and prevent cancer.

I believe that lowering the age and giving woman the knowledge about cervical cancer will enable all woman the right to live. There is little to no awareness about cervical cancer.

By reducing the age of smear tests and cervical screening today we can save lives, we can tackle cell changes early and prevent cervical cancer.

If I can do anything with my life I want to make this change happen, it's too late for me but it's not too late for the next generation of young ladies.

On 13 September 2018 the government issued a response to the e-petition and this can also be found on the e-petition website.

This debate pack provides some background to the issue as well as relevant news articles, parliamentary material and further reading.

The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

Contents

1. Background	2
1.1 Cervical screening programme	2
1.2 The case for lowering the screening age	2
1.3 Recent developments	4
1.4 Cervical cancer statistics	5
2. News articles	7
3. Parliamentary material	8
3.1 Written parliamentary questions (PQs)	8
Oral Parliamentary Questions	10
3.2 10	
4. Further reading	13

1. Background

1.1 Cervical screening programme

The cervical screening test (sometimes referred to as a smear test) is a method of detecting abnormal cells on the cervix. Cervical screening is not a test for cancer.

The [NHS Cervical Screening Programme \(NHSCSP\)](#) is nationally coordinated and locally managed. It involves:

- Liquid based cytology to detect abnormalities of the cervix.
- Human papilloma virus (HPV) triage and test of cure.
- Colposcopy to diagnose cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) and to differentiate high-grade lesions from low-grade abnormalities.

The [National Institute for Clinical Excellence \(NICE\)](#) guidance on the age for screening is that: all women between age 25–64 years are eligible for cervical screening and will be invited by their GP for a test at the following intervals:

- women age 25–49 years are invited for screening every 3 years;
- women age 50–64 years are invited for screening every 5 years.
- Women 65 years of age or older should be screened if:
 - they have not had a cervical screening test since 50 years of age and/or
 - a recent cervical cancer screen was abnormal.

In accordance with the NICE guidance, women in the UK between the ages of 50 and 64 will be invited to have the screening test at the recommended intervals for their age group. Women under 25 can be invited for the test by their GP up to 6 months before their 25th birthday. If they have not had a screening test within the appropriate time, they may be offered one when they next visit their GP – and they can contact their GP to book a screening appointment if they are overdue.

A general overview of the NHS screening programme is available on the [NHS website](#).

1.2 The case for lowering the screening age

There have been repeated calls for the age at which the cervical screening test is offered to be lowered. Following the death of a 19 year old woman from cervical cancer in March 2014, [a parliamentary e-petition \(61335\)](#) called for the lowering of the age to 20. This collected 14,934 signatures and prompted a Government response which referred to a UK National Screening Committee (UK NSC) review

of evidence of the risks and benefits for cervical screening in women aged 20-24. The [Government response](#) stated:

In 2012, the UK NSC carried out a review looking at the latest available evidence for the risks and benefits for cervical screening in women aged 20-24. The Committee agreed with the decision previously made by the Advisory Committee for Cervical Screening (ACCS) in 2003, and confirmed in 2009, which recommended that the age of first invitation for the NHS cervical screening programme should be 25. It agreed on the basis that the evidence indicates that screening women below this age has relatively little benefit, with screening doing more harm than good. Its next review is due in 2015/16.¹

The UK NSC reported that no new scientific evidence was available to support the reintroduction of screening for women aged under 25. It also found that treatment following screening in this age group could lead to an increased risk of complications in childbearing, as well as causing unnecessary anxiety following a false positive, which occurs in one in three women in this age group.

Cervical cancer in women under the age of 25 is very rare. Younger women often undergo natural and harmless changes in the cervix that screening would identify as cervical abnormalities; in most cases, these abnormalities will resolve themselves without any need for intervention.

It is recognised that cervical cancer is linked to a persistent infection with the Human Papillomavirus (HPV), a very common sexually transmitted infection. As a result, the HPV vaccination programme was set up to offer girls from the age of 12 immunisation against the most high-risk strains of HPV, before many girls become sexually active. The HPV vaccination programme started in September 2008 with all 12 to 13-year-old and 17 to 18-year-old girls being offered the vaccine in school. Girls then aged 18 who accepted the vaccine will soon be receiving their invitation to enter the NHS cervical screening programme this year. It is expected that the vaccine will have reduced the already low rates of cervical cancer in these young women, and allow them to be protected for years to come.

The ACCS did, however, recognise the need to ensure that young women who presented at a primary care setting with symptoms of cervical cancer were given the best advice and, if required, a further examination. It recommended the development of new guidance, Clinical practice guidelines for the assessment of young women aged 20-24 with abnormal vaginal bleeding, which was published on 3 March 2010. The guidance was produced by a multi-disciplinary group, including professionals, patients and the voluntary sector. It was reviewed by a number of GPs, and was endorsed by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Royal College of Physicians. The guidance can be found at www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/cervical/publications/doh-guidelines-young-women.pdf.

The [Government's response](#) to the current petition was given on 18 September 2018 and repeated that it had 'accepted the UK National Screening Committee recommendation that the first invitation for

¹ The review is currently in [consultation](#).

cervical screening should be offered at age 25 based on the assessment of research evidence.’ It added that the recommendation:

[...] was based on evidence that a large number of women below this age received relatively little benefit from being screened and treated. It is only where the offer to screen provides more good than harm that a screening programme is recommended. This UK NSC recommendation also concurred with a major review by the Advisory Committee on Cervical Screening in 2009.

In terms of raising public awareness about cervical cancer, the Government response stated that Public Health England’s ‘Be Clear on Cancer’ campaigns have been running since 2011 ‘to raise the public’s awareness of specific cancer symptoms; encourage people with those symptoms to go to the doctor; and diagnose cancer at an earlier stage, and therefore make it more treatable, and thereby improve cancer survival rates.’

A recent [answer](#) to a Parliamentary Question confirms that the Government’s position on the cervical cancer screening age is unchanged:

Cervical Cancer: Screening: Written question - [205928](#)

Jim Shannon: To ask the Minister for Women and Equalities, if she will hold discussions with the Secretary of State for Health on making the NHS cervical screening programme available to women aged 18 years and over.

Victoria Atkins: The best independent evidence shows that routine screening of women under 25 actually does more harm than good. Cervical cancer in women under the age of 25 is very rare and younger women often undergo natural and harmless changes in the cervix that screening would identify as abnormalities, resulting in many false negatives.

We offer vaccination to girls to protect against the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) which protects against 70 per cent of cervical cancers and which is expected to reduce the already low rates of cervical cancer in these young women and allow them to be protected for years to come.

Young women with symptoms of cervical cancer, largely unusual bleeding particularly after sex, should see their GP and be referred to a gynecologist if clinically appropriate.

My Rt Hon Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities has no plans to discuss this issue with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

[Answered on 15 January 2019]

1.3 Recent developments

NHS England’s recently published [NHS Long Term Plan](#)² states that a review of cancer screening programmes, including for cervical cancer, will be undertaken this year:

3.55. NHS England has asked Sir Mike Richards to lead a review of the current cancer screening programmes and diagnostic capacity. This will make initial recommendations by Easter 2019 and be finalised in the summer 2019, to further improve the delivery of the screening programmes, increase

² NHS England, [NHS Long Term Plan](#), January 2019

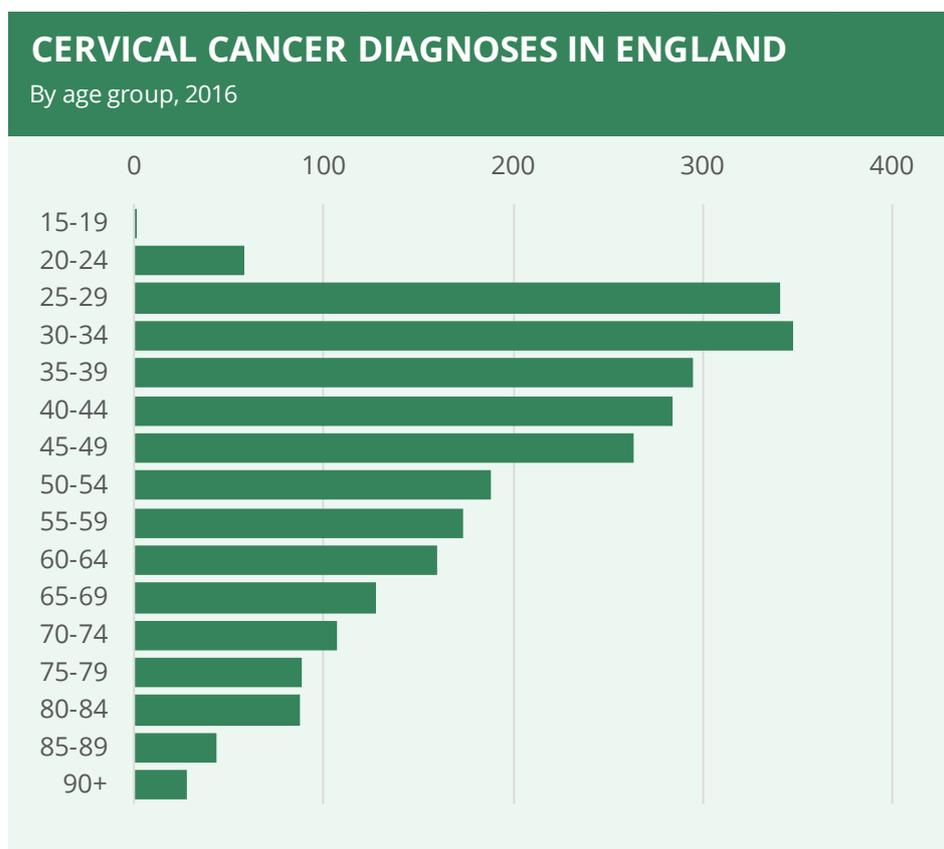
uptake and learn the lessons from the recent issues around breast and cervical screening, and modernise and expand diagnostic capacity. We will take forward the findings of the review as part of this Plan.

In addition, the Plan states that human papillomavirus test (HPV) primary screening for cervical cancer will be implemented across England:

3.54. We will implement HPV primary screening for cervical cancer across England by 2020. This method of testing is more sensitive and more reliable than liquid-based cytology so will detect more women at risk of cervical cancer and facilitate their treatment to prevent cancer developing.

1.4 Cervical cancer statistics

In England in 2016, 2,594 cases of cervical cancer were diagnosed. 3 in 5 of these were among women aged under 50. 15% of cases were among women aged under 30.³



In 2017 in England there were 674 deaths where the cause was identified as cervical cancer. 28% of these (189) were among women aged under 50, and 1.7% (12) were among women aged under 30.⁴

³ ONS, [Cancer Registrations 2016](#)

⁴ NOMIS, [Mortality Statistics](#)

In 2017/18, 4.46 million women aged 25-49 were invited for a cervical screening. **Cervical screening coverage** has fallen in recent years.⁵ In 2018:

- 69.1% of women aged 25-49 had been screened in the past 3½ years, down from 73.7% in 2011. This means that 3.1 million eligible women aged 25-49 had not been screened in the past 3½ years.
- 76.2% of women aged 50-64 had been screened in the past 5½ years, down from 80.1% in 2011. This means that 1.1 million women aged 50-64 had not been screened in the past 5½ years.⁶

1.7 million women aged 25-64 have never attended a cervical screening test. 1.1 million of these are aged 34 or below. A further 345,000 women aged 25-64 have not had a test in the last 10 years.

Coverage varies across England. For 25-49 year olds, screening rates vary from 61.6% in London to 72.9% in the North East. For 50-64 year olds, coverage varies from 74.0% in London to 78.3% in the East Midlands.

Most cervical screens return with either 'negative' (nothing found) or 'borderline change': 96.7% of tests results fall into one of these two categories. Among ages 25-29, 92.9% of tests return one of these two results, and 2.4% of tests return high-grade dyskaryosis (changes in the cervical cells). NHS England explain the procedures around cervical screening results [here](#).

If the age limit for cancer screening were lowered to 18, an additional 2.3 million women would fall under the scope of the programme.⁷ This would represent a 15% increase in the number of women eligible for testing.

⁵ NHS Digital, [Cervical screening programme 2017/18](#)

⁶ Note that the 'age-appropriate' screening period varies by age group – 3.5 years for 5-49 year olds and 5.5 years for 50-64 year olds.

⁷ NOMIS, [National population projections](#)

2. News articles

[Call for urgent action to increase cervical screening attendance rates](#) - Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, January 2018

[New cervical cancer test to 'revolutionise screening' after proving to be four times as effective as a smear check, study finds](#), Telegraph, 17 December 2018

[Australia on track to wipe out cervical cancer within 20 years](#), Guardian, 03 October 2018

[HPV vaccine has led to 'significant drop' in cervical cancer rates among UK women, study reveals](#), Independent, 18 June 2018

[Eliminating cervical cancer globally is within reach if governments act](#), Guardian, 03 March 2018

[Cervical cancer screening test age to rise in Scotland](#), BBC, 04 June 2016

['Why I don't want to wait another year for a smear test'](#), Telegraph, 14 August 2014

[Sophie Jones's death is tragic but smear tests for teenagers are not the answer](#), Guardian, 18 March 2014

3. Parliamentary material

3.1 Written parliamentary questions (PQs)

[Cervical Cancer: Screening](#) PQ HL12680 22 Jan 2019

Asked by: Baroness Tonge | **Party:** Non-affiliated

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the uptake in cervical smear tests; how they will encourage women to take such tests; and how they will increase the availability of such tests.

Answering member: Baroness Manzoor | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Department of Health and Social Care

NHS England has reviewed the data from 2013 showing the gradual national and international decline in the five-year coverage. Assessments for the decline were done in partnership with key stakeholders Public Health England (PHE) and Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust.

Following Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust report published in January 2018, NHS England and PHE have modified the commissioning levers and communication processes, for example through supporting Jo's Trust in the Time to Screen campaign and the launch of its first national multimedia cervical screening campaign 'Be Clear on Cancer' in March 2019 promoting uptake of cervical screening.

NHS England has supported the Cancer Alliances who bring together local senior clinical and managerial leaders representing the whole cancer patient pathway across a specific geography, and have a general role in improving early diagnosis. In turn they have developed specific plans to improve uptake rates in screening programmes as part of that agenda with cervical screening considered a priority area.

Cancer Research UK and Macmillan general practitioners (GPs) are also being utilised to provide awareness and training, with work and focus groups to target reducing inequalities among women over 50 and women from Eastern European countries a specific focus in one region.

Training of GP receptionists is underway to improve ease of access to a screening appointment, while a toolkit has been developed to reduce the inequality in uptake among women with a learning disability. In addition, NHS England recently announced that Professor Sir Mike Richards has been asked to lead a review of cancer screening programmes which will consider ways to increase uptake of cervical screening and the NHS Long Term Plan confirms that using human papillomavirus testing as the primary screen for cervical cancer will be implemented across England by 2020.

[Cervical Cancer: Screening](#) PQ 208783 22 Jan 2019

Asked by: Field, Frank | **Party:** Independent (affiliation)

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what assessment he has made of the potential merits of enabling women under the age of 25 to undergo cervical screening.

Answering member: Steve Brine | **Party:** Conservative Party |
Department: Department of Health and Social Care

Almost all cervical cancers are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV) which is linked to the development of the disease. With the high uptake of the HPV vaccination in adolescent girls since 2008, there is little evidence for lowering the age of cervical screening, as those born since September 1994 will turn 25 this year and become eligible for routine screening.

The United Kingdom National Screening Committee looked at the starting age for cervical screening in 2012 and recommended that screening should be offered from the age of 25. This was based on the evidence that screening below this age would in fact cause more harm than benefit.

Younger women often undergo natural and harmless changes in the cervix that screening would identify as cervical abnormalities. In the vast majority of cases these abnormalities will resolve themselves without any need for treatment.

A number of questions and answers have been written to help explain the rationale for starting screening at age 25 rather than 20. This document can be viewed at the following link:

<https://legacyscreening.phe.org.uk/cervicalcancer-qa>

[Cervical Cancer: Screening](#) PQ 184977 01 Nov 2018

Asked by: Sandbach, Antoinette | **Party:** Conservative Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, whether GP's have authority to request cervical cancer smear tests when patients under 25 show symptoms of cervical cancer.

Answering member: Steve Brine | **Party:** Conservative Party |
Department: Department of Health and Social Care

As part of the delivery of essential medical services under the General Medical Services Contract Regulations, general practitioner practices must offer consultation and, where appropriate, physical examination for the purposes of identifying the need, if any, for treatment or further investigation. Practices should carry out treatment or further investigation as is necessary and appropriate, including the referral of a patient to other services or other health care professionals.

Patients aged over 25 are, of course, eligible for the cervical screening programme.

[Human Papillomavirus: Vaccination](#) PQ HL8605 27 Jun 2018

Asked by: The Countess of Mar | **Party:** Crossbench

To ask Her Majesty's Government what action they are taking to ensure that the cohort of women who have received human papilloma virus vaccinations are aware that they should still attend cervical smear test appointments.

Answering member: Lord O'Shaughnessy | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Department of Health and Social Care

The human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination programme states in patient communications that cervical screening (smear tests) will continue to be important whether women have had the HPV vaccine or not. Women aged 25 to 64 who are registered with a general practitioner are automatically invited for cervical screening. This includes women who have had the HPV vaccination as the vaccine does not guarantee completed protection of against all high risk strains of HPV. The importance of cervical screening is also reiterated online on NHS Choices.

Cervical Cancer: Screening PQ 140779 14 May 2018

Asked by: Fletcher, Colleen | **Party:** Labour Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, whether the Government has made an assessment of the potential merits of reducing the cervical cancer screening age.

Answering member: Steve Brine | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Department of Health and Social Care

The United Kingdom National Screening Committee looked at the starting age for cervical cancer screening in 2012 and recommended inviting women for screening from the age of 25 based on the evidence that screening women under the age of 25 causes more harm than good; that changes are very common in the young cervix, and approximately one in three women under 25 would be identified by a screening test as requiring further investigation. In the vast majority of these younger women, the abnormalities will clear up of their own accord. Further information is available here:

<https://legacyscreening.phe.org.uk/cervicalcancer>

3.2 Oral parliamentary questions

Engagements HC deb 24 Jan 2018, volume 635, cc263-4

Asked by: Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab) | **Party:** Labour Party

Amber Rose Cliff, my 25-year-old constituent, lost her battle with cervical cancer and died in January last year. Amber went to her GP around 30 times with symptoms and repeatedly asked for a smear test, but she was refused. She got the test only when she paid to have it done privately, and sadly, the cancer had spread by that point. Will the Prime Minister support Amber's family in their campaign to introduce Amber's law, which would change the regulations so that women under 25 could access a smear test on the national health service when they were symptomatic?

Answered by: The Prime Minister | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Prime Minister

I send my condolences—I am sure the whole House does—to Amber's family on this terrible thing that has happened. Look, the smear test is hugely important. Sadly, what we see, even for those women who qualify today to have the smear test, is that too many women do not take it up. I know that it is not a comfortable thing to do, because I have it, as others do, but it is

so important for women's health. I first want to encourage women to actually have the smear test. Secondly, the hon. Lady raised an issue about the availability of that test. I will ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health to look at this issue. It is a question that has been raised before for those who are under the age of 25. Of course, action has been taken in terms of the vaccine that has been introduced for teenagers. There have been some questions about that—I have had people in my constituency raising questions about it. We need to address this issue in every way possible, so we will look at the question of the age qualification for the smear test. My overall message is, please, those who are called for a smear test, go and have it.

[Engagements](#) HC deb 31 Oct 2018, volume 648, cc908-911

Asked by: Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab) | **Party:** Labour Party

Young women are dying because if they are aged under 25 they cannot get a cervical smear test, even if they have the relevant symptoms, and even if their GP wants them to have one. Will the Prime Minister take the easiest decision she will be asked to take this year and abolish this arbitrary age limit, and in doing so save women's lives?

Answered by: The Prime Minister | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Prime Minister

I recognise the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. It is one that has been raised before. Of course, on issues like this, it is important that we take clinical guidance, but issues about the future of the NHS and how it operates are matters that those in the NHS are themselves considering as part of their long-term plan for the future.

[Engagements](#) HC deb 05 Dec 2018, volume 650, cc883-4

Asked by: Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con) | **Party:** Conservative Party

As my right hon. Friend knows, none of us looks forward to a smear test, but it can make the difference between life and death. Worryingly, nearly a third of women are missing out on cervical screening. Can I ask my right hon. Friend what steps she and her Government are taking to make sure that more women get tested and do not suffer the terrible consequences of picking up cancer too late?

Answered by: The Prime Minister | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Prime Minister

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising what is an important point. We do recognise that we need to do more to encourage women to undertake cervical screening tests. In October, we announced a package of measures that will be rolled out across the country, which has the aim of seeing three quarters of all cancers detected at an early stage by 2028. That will see a radical overhaul of the screening programmes, and they will be made more accessible and easier to use.

But I just want to give this very simple message, and I am able to do so standing at this Dispatch Box: smear tests are not nice. All

those of us who have had smear tests recognise that they are not nice. But they are important. If you want to see cancer detected early, have your smear test. A few minutes of discomfort could be saving your life.

4. Further reading

[Cancer Research UK](#) provides an outline of some of the debate around cervical cancer screening, including the case to replace the Liquid Based Cytology (LBC) test with a HPV test.

[Cervical Cancer Prevention Week – a view from Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust](#), Blog (Public Health England), PHE Screening, 16 January 2019

[Cervical screening aged 24 or under](#), Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust, updated 23 October 2018

[Guidance: Health matters: making cervical screening more accessible](#) – Public Health England, August 2017

[Progress in Cervical Screening in the UK](#) - Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, March 2016

[BJOG Debate: The age of cervical screening should be reduced](#) - Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, 2015

[What is the right age for cervical screening?](#), Blog (Public Health England), Public Health Matters, 28 April 2014

[Cervical screening – is age the only debate?](#), Cancer Research UK, 09 June 2014

[HPV testing and vaccination could cut cervical screening to twice in a lifetime](#), Cancer Research UK, 10 November 2010

About the Library

The House of Commons Library research service provides MPs and their staff with the impartial briefing and evidence base they need to do their work in scrutinising Government, proposing legislation, and supporting constituents.

As well as providing MPs with a confidential service we publish open briefing papers, which are available on the Parliament website.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publically available research briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing only with Members and their staff.

If you have any general questions about the work of the House of Commons you can email hcinfo@parliament.uk.

Disclaimer

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties. It is a general briefing only and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific advice. The House of Commons or the author(s) shall not be liable for any errors or omissions, or for any loss or damage of any kind arising from its use, and may remove, vary or amend any information at any time without prior notice.

The House of Commons accepts no responsibility for any references or links to, or the content of, information maintained by third parties. This information is provided subject to the [conditions of the Open Parliament Licence](#).