

Debate Pack
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General debate: Accessibility of radiotherapy

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A general debate has been scheduled in Westminster Hall on the accessibility of radiotherapy. The debate will take place on Tuesday 18 July and will be opened by Selaine Saxby MP.

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Overview

1.1 What is Radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy means the use of radiation, usually X-rays, to treat illness. Radiotherapy is an important part of overall cancer management and treatment and can be used on its own or in combination with other types of cancer treatment (including surgery and chemotherapy). Referral for radiotherapy treatment is made by a Consultant Clinical Oncologist who is a member of a tumour specific multi-disciplinary team. Most radiotherapy treatment is delivered on an outpatient basis.

[The Cancer Research UK website](#) notes that radiotherapy destroys the cancer cells in the treated area by damaging the DNA within these cells. Although normal cells are also affected by radiation, they are better at repairing themselves than the cancer cells. The treatment aims to give a high dose to the cancer but as low a dose as possible to the surrounding healthy cells. This aims to give the highest chance of curing or shrinking the cancer while reducing the risk of side effects.

1.2 Statistics

In 2021/22 in England there were 134,419 radiotherapy episodes in England. This is 4.1% lower than the pre-pandemic (2019/20) level of 140,142. An episode is defined as a continuous period of care for radiotherapy including all preparation, planning and delivery. This data is sourced from [NHS England's Radiotherapy Dataset](#).

Most waiting times statistics for cancer are recorded for all types of treatment together, rather than for radiotherapy specifically. The percentage of patients waiting longer than the target time for cancer treatments has reached record levels in the last year. You can read a summary of this data in our briefing paper [NHS Key Statistics](#).

1.3 Policies and guidance

The independent cancer taskforce's five-year strategy for cancer, [Achieving World-Class Cancer Outcomes: A Strategy for England 2015- 2020](#) (PDF) noted the advances that have been made in radiotherapy technology have not always been consistently adopted across the NHS:

Advances in radiotherapy using cutting-edge imaging and computing technology have helped target radiation doses more precisely. As a result, they enable better outcomes, with improved quality of life for patients and reduced NHS costs in the long term, through patients suffering fewer side effects. Historically the NHS has not adopted new techniques into clinical practice in a consistent and equitable way across England. In 2014, NHS England and Cancer Research UK jointly published a Vision for Radiotherapy. This recommended that all patients should receive advanced and innovative radiotherapy that had been shown to be clinically and cost effective.¹

[The NHS Long Term Plan](#) (January 2019) included a commitment to modernising radiotherapy services. The plan specifically promised “[faster, smarter and effective radiotherapy](#)”, supported by greater networking of specialised expertise. The Long Term Plan also set out that changes would be made to the radiotherapy payment system to incentivise the adoption of evidence-based best practice care and enable the appropriate replacement of equipment.

NHS England Specialised Commissioning is the responsible commissioner for all radiotherapy services across England. The exact scope of NHS England’s commissioning responsibility is set out in the [Manual for Prescribed Specialised Services](#). This service area is supported by a Clinical Reference Group (CRG). The main function of a CRG is to provide the primary source of clinical advice for specialised services and the membership comprises clinical, Patient and Public Voice (PPV) representatives and professional associations. Each CRG is also supported by an NHS England Commissioning Lead and Public Health Lead.

Clinical Oncologists are the doctors responsible for prescribing radiotherapy to treat cancer. The Royal College of Radiologists’ [Clinical Oncology Workforce Census 2022](#) found that, in England, there is a 15% shortfall in Oncologists, which will rise to 24% by 2027 without action. It also found there is a postcode lottery in access to Clinical Oncologists across the country – especially in rural areas. In London, there are 5.6 Oncologists per 100,000 of the older population, compared to only 2.9 in the East Midlands.

In June 2023, NHS England published the [NHS Long Term Workforce Plan](#), as commissioned by the Government. Actions in the plan are backed by £2.4 billion in Government funding up to 2028/29. The plans set out education and training expansion and reform to address shortages in particular health professions. If fully implemented, the plan projects an increase of 60,000 to 74,000 doctors. For allied health professions (AHPs), including therapeutic radiographers who can deliver radiotherapy, the plan projects an increase of 71,000 to 76,000 AHPs. It also aims for at least 80% of therapeutic

¹ [Achieving World-Class Cancer Outcomes: A Strategy for England 2015- 2020](#) (2015) (PDF, 4.9MB)

radiographers to join the AHP workforce via an apprenticeship route by 2031/32.²

NHS England's radiotherapy modernisation programme began in 2016 with the aim of implementing a long-term solution to equipment replacement; and increasing access to innovative radiotherapy treatments and modern care. Part of the programme includes the commissioning of 11 Radiotherapy Operational Delivery Networks across England. This programme is aimed at improving access to and reducing variation in the quality of radiotherapy services. A PQ answered in July 2023 gives an overview of work to upgrade radiotherapy equipment:

Since 2016, around £162 million of central investment has been made to replace or upgrade around 100 radiotherapy machines so that every radiotherapy service has access to modern equipment capable of delivering innovative treatment techniques. This investment was in addition to the investment that NHS trusts make to maintain their infrastructure.

From April 2022, the responsibility for investing in new radiotherapy machines sits with local systems. This is supported by the 2021 Spending Review, which set aside £12 billion in operational capital for the NHS (2022 to 2025) and the recent Capital Planning Guidance. This guidance states that integrated care systems will need to develop replacement plans as part of their multi-year capital plans, in partnership with specialised commissioners, Cancer Alliances and Radiotherapy Operational Delivery Networks, based on an assessment of equipment age, capacity and demand, opportunities to improve access and service risk.

NHS England is currently undertaking a stocktake of Linear Accelerator age, which will be completed in summer 2023 and is working with partners to undertake a demand and capacity review which will complete in 2023/24.³

Further information on cancer policies is available in the Library briefing on [Support for cancer in England](#) (June 2023).

In September 2021 the Scottish Government published [Collaborative and Compassionate Cancer Care](#), a five-year strategy for children and young people in Scotland. [The Quality Statement for Cancer](#) sets out the Welsh Government's five year plan to improve the quality of cancer services and outcomes in Wales (March 2021). The Department of Health in Northern Ireland has published a [Cancer Strategy for Northern Ireland 2021-2031](#) (PDF).

² NHS England, [NHS Long Term Workforce Plan](#), June 2023, page 45

³ [PQ 191821 on Radiotherapy: Equipment](#), 4 July 2023

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Press articles

Please note that whilst the House of Commons Library usually aims for a mix of press articles from a variety of sources, the Daily Express recently ran a campaign to increase funding for radiotherapy. As part of this campaign the Daily Express ran a number of articles with unique and exclusive coverage of accessibility of radiotherapy, which warranted the inclusion of these articles in this Library debate pack.

Radiotherapy treatment could be sped up for thousands of breast cancer sufferers

Daily Express
1 July 2023

Radiotherapy treatment is 'overlooked and underfunded' in England, report warns

Daily Express
22 June 2023

Cancer patients face life-threatening delays due to lack of staff, say UK radiologists

The Guardian
8 June 2023

Shortage of cancer centres leaves 3.4 million living beyond average travel time

Daily Express
2 June 2023

Experts call on Health Secretary for increased funding

Daily Express
28 April 2023

Britain left lagging 'far behind' after life-saving cancer treatment left underfunded

Daily Express
29 March 2023

Lift the 'unsung hero' of cancer care out of crisis and invest in radiotherapy campaign

Daily Express
26 February 2023

Invest in radiotherapy to clear backlog of cancer patients

The Times [subscription required]
21 April 2021

3 Parliamentary material

3.1 Debates

Cancer Care

14 March 2023 | Westminster Hall | 729 cc290-306WH

Access to Radiotherapy

12 January 2022 | Westminster Hall | 706 cc227-248WH

3.2 PQs

Radiotherapy: Medical Equipment

4 Jul 2023 | UIN 191821

Asked by: Rachael Maskell

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what steps his Department is taking to improve equipment for radiotherapy services.

Answering member: Helen Whately | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

Since 2016, around £162 million of central investment has been made to replace or upgrade around 100 radiotherapy machines so that every radiotherapy service has access to modern equipment capable of delivering innovative treatment techniques. This investment was in addition to the investment that NHS trusts make to maintain their infrastructure.

From April 2022, the responsibility for investing in new radiotherapy machines sits with local systems. This is supported by the 2021 Spending Review, which set aside £12 billion in operational capital for the NHS (2022 to 2025) and the recent Capital Planning Guidance. This guidance states that integrated care systems will need to develop replacement plans as part of their multi-year capital plans, in partnership with specialised commissioners, Cancer Alliances and Radiotherapy Operational Delivery Networks, based on an assessment of equipment age, capacity and demand, opportunities to improve access and service risk.

NHS England is currently undertaking a stocktake of Linear Accelerator age, which will be completed in summer 2023 and is working with partners to undertake a demand and capacity review which will complete in 2023/24.

Radiotherapy

23 June 2023 | UIN 189830

Asked by: Rachael Maskell

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, if he will take steps to help ensure that patients do not have travel journeys of more than 45 minutes when attending radiotherapy appointments.

Answering member: Helen Whately

The travel a patient needs to undertake is dependent on the types of treatment needed on an individual case basis. Specialised services are not available in every local hospital because they have to be delivered by specialist teams of health professionals who have the necessary skills, experience and access to equipment and medicines. Patient-specific requirements are also based on what each individual could manage and cope with and would be discussed between the patient and clinician.

Radiotherapy

19 April 2023 | UIN 180239

Asked by: Grahame Morris

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, whether the Major Conditions and Diseases Strategy will include plans to increase (a) access to radiotherapy cancer treatments, (b) the number of radiotherapy treatment machines and (c) the specialist radiotherapy cancer workforce.

Answering member: Helen Whately | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

The Government cannot pre-empt the Major Conditions Strategy prior to its publication.

The Major Conditions Strategy will look at the treatment and prevention of cancer in people of all ages, covering the patient pathway. The strategy will look at a wide range of interventions and enablers to improve outcomes and experience for cancer patients.

This Strategy will draw on previous work on cancer, including over 5,000 submissions provided to the Department as part of our Call for Evidence last year. We will continue to work closely with stakeholders, citizens, and the National Health Service in coming weeks to identify actions for the Strategy that will have the most impact.

Radiotherapy: Finance

19 April 2023 | UIN 180240

Asked by: Grahame Morris

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, how much was spent from the public purse on radiotherapy equipment and software in (a) 2019-20, (b) 2020-21 and (c) 2021-22; and whether the Government plans to increase that funding in future years.

Answering member: Helen Whately | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

The total central investment made between 2016 and 2021 was £162 million and enabled the replacement or upgrade of circa 100 radiotherapy treatment machines.

From April 2022, the responsibility for investing in new radiotherapy machines sits with local systems. This is supported by the 2021 Spending Review, which set aside £12 billion in operational capital for the National Health Service, and the recent Capital Planning Guidance, which states that integrated care systems (ICSs) will need to develop replacement plans as part of their multi-year capital plans, in partnership with specialised commissioners, Cancer Alliances and Radiotherapy Operational Delivery Networks, based on an assessment of equipment age, capacity and demand, opportunities to improve access and service risk.

Cancer: Radiotherapy

28 May 2020 | UIN 42217

Asked by: Selaine Saxby

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what steps he is taking to ensure that radiotherapy services used in cancer treatment continue during the covid-19 outbreak.

Answering member: Jo Churchill | Department: Department of Health and Social Care

A letter was issued to trusts on 29 April detailing the Second Phase of Response to COVID-19. This letter sets out that:

Local systems and Cancer Alliances must continue to identify ring-fenced diagnostic and surgical capacity for cancer, and providers must protect and deliver cancer surgery and cancer treatment by ensuring that cancer surgery hubs are fully operational. Full use should be made of the available contracted independent sector hospital and diagnostic capacity locally and regionally. Regional cancer Senior Responsible Officers must now provide assurance that these arrangements are in place everywhere.

Treatment, including radiotherapy, must be brought back to pre-pandemic levels at the earliest opportunity to minimise potential harm, and to reduce the scale of the post-pandemic surge in demand.

3.3

Early Day Motions

RADIOTHERAPY AND THE 10-YEAR CANCER PLAN

EDM 481 (session 2022-23)

20 Oct 2022

Tim Farron

That this House recognises that the cancer backlog is a national health emergency which urgently needs tackling and that cancer is the most time-critical and dangerous of all backlogs; further recognises that radiotherapy is an essential, readily available, high-tech and vital cancer treatment needed in 50 percent of cancer treatments and in 40 percent of cancer cures, which is internationally recognised as a model solution for cancer backlog recovery and can help reduce the waiting lists; but notes that the radiotherapy service is overlooked and currently only receives 5 percent of the NHS cancer budget; and therefore calls on the Government to ensure a new fully funded radiotherapy strategy is included in the upcoming 10-Year Cancer Plan.

4 Further reading

4.1 Websites

[Radiotherapy UK](#)

[All Party Parliamentary Group for Radiotherapy](#)

[Radiotherapy | Cancer Research UK](#)

[NHS England | Radiotherapy](#)

[Radiotherapy | Macmillan Cancer Support](#)

4.2 Reports and position statements

[The future of radiotherapy services in England](#)

Cancer Research UK

4 May 2023

[Inquiry into radiotherapy and the cancer crisis](#)

APPG for Radiotherapy

January 2023

[Radiotherapy](#)

The Institute of Cancer Research

April 2021

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