

Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

7 July 2020

Dear Sir George

I want to thank you for your letter highlighting this very important issue. Cheshire and Merseyside Cancer Alliance shares your determination to ensure that people with cancer, including those with pancreatic cancer, are seen, diagnosed and treated with minimal delay despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Alliance comprises all the NHS organisations in Cheshire and Merseyside and we have worked together throughout the pandemic to minimise disruption to cancer care. As SRO for the Alliance, I want to assure you that urgent cancer care has continued throughout and all our efforts are now focused on restoring services to normal levels, while maintaining a safe environment for patients and staff.

In order to do this whilst COVID-19 is still in our population we need to make some adjustments to services such as implementing new infection control procedures.

Our restoration plans for cancer services focus on three key aims, namely:

- **Creating enough capacity** to ensure that patients waiting in the system are delayed no further, and that all newly-referred patients are diagnosed and treated promptly;
- Ensuring **equity of access** across the system so that patients are not disadvantaged because of local capacity constraints;
- Reminding patients that the NHS is open for business and it's very **important to contact their GP or pharmacist** about any symptoms that could be cancer – the #HelpUsHelpYou cancer campaign; and
- Building confidence by **reassuring patients that it is safe to attend hospital** and that their diagnosis and treatment will take place in an environment and manner that keeps them safe from COVID-19.

The actions we have taken and will continue to take include:

Referral & diagnosis

At the beginning of the pandemic, there was a significant reduction in the number of patients seeking advice from their GPs about symptoms that could be cancer. Referrals dropped by 70 percent in April and, although they have recovered, are still 20% below pre-pandemic levels. We are doing all we can to restore confidence and urge patients to come forward and attend hospital appointments through the #HelpUsHelpYou campaign. This includes video diaries from patients currently undergoing treatment and explaining the measures in place to keep them safe when they visit hospital.

We are particularly keen to raise awareness of pancreatic cancer in Cheshire and Merseyside and for people to get any potential symptoms checked out as quickly as possible. As you know, unfortunately

people with pancreatic cancer may not have any symptoms in the early stages and are only diagnosed when it is quite advanced. We will be actively promoting Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month this November and would very much welcome any support you could offer, if that would be of interest to you.

Diagnostic hub

Diagnostic services have been impacted during the pandemic, especially endoscopy due to the additional infection control procedures now needed. We have secured additional capacity for both diagnostics and surgery in the independent sector, such as Spire Liverpool Hospital and Fairfield Independent Hospital in St Helens. We have also secured two new CT scanners for the region, one of which arrives at St Helens Hospital last week. The new Clatterbridge Cancer Centre – Liverpool (CCC-L), which opened on 27 June, also provides increased CT capacity in Cheshire and Merseyside and 500 scans have already been booked there. We would be happy to show you around the new CCC-L at a convenient time, please let us know if this is something you wish to do.

Cancer surgical hub

We have established a single waiting list for cancer patients and established a cancer surgical hub. The hub keeps an oversight of capacity and demand across the Cheshire and Merseyside region and facilitates the transfer of surgical patients where local capacity is not available.

The majority of complex abdominal cancer surgery, including pancreatic surgery, is undertaken at Liverpool University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (LUHFT). The cancer surgery volumes are returning to near pre-COVID-19 levels across our region and the numbers of surgery by tumour group are monitored on a weekly basis. We have shared your letter and this response with LUHFT in case they have anything further to add.

Pancreatic Cancer Research

We also have a very active programme of pancreatic cancer research and clinical trials, led by Professor Dan Palmer at The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre and University of Liverpool, and Cheshire and Merseyside now has a global reputation in this field. Professor Palmer and his team have a number of trials underway, including drug combinations and novel molecular agents that are showing promising results in improving outcomes for patients with pancreatic cancer. Again, we would be happy to discuss this with you, if you would like to review our cancer research facilities at the new Clatterbridge Cancer Centre in Liverpool.

I hope you find this information helpful. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions.

Yours sincerely



Dr Liz Bishop
SRO, Cheshire & Merseyside Cancer Alliance

cc Steve Warburton, Chief Executive, Liverpool University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust