

Question 1: Initial priorities identified by the Committee

The Committee has identified several potential priorities for work during the Sixth Senedd, including: public health and prevention; the health and social care workforce, including organisational culture and staff wellbeing; access to mental health services; evidence-based innovation in health and social care; support and services for unpaid carers; access to COVID and non-COVID rehabilitation services; and access to services for long-term chronic conditions, including musculoskeletal conditions.

Q1. Which of the issues listed above do you think should be a priority, and why?

You can comment on as many or few of the issues as you want.

In your answers, you might want to think about:

What impact or outcomes could be achieved through any work by the Committee?

How the Committee might address the issue?

When any Committee work should take place?

Whether there are any specific groups, communities or stakeholders that the Committee should involve or hear from in any work?

The Hepatitis C Trust supports the Committee's proposed prioritisation of public health and prevention. Hepatitis C care is a critical aspect of public health policy, and eliminating the virus by Wales' target of 2030 would be a significant public health victory that would help to prevent further cases of liver cancer and other health conditions. The next few years will be crucial in determining whether Wales meets this commitment, meaning urgent action is vital.

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that can cause a range of health impacts but primarily affects the liver. People can live for many years without symptoms and untreated cases can cause fatal cirrhosis and liver cancer. The majority of cases arise through the sharing of drug injecting paraphernalia, though there are other potential transmission routes, including overseas medical care, tattooing and receipt of a blood transfusion in the UK prior to 1991. Hepatitis C disproportionately affects disadvantaged and marginalised communities, including injecting drug users, homeless people, prisoners, and certain migrant communities.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that globally 71 million people have chronic hepatitis C infection. Around 210,000 people are chronically infected with HCV in the UK, with 8,000-12,000 of these in Wales. The WHO has announced a global health sector strategy on viral hepatitis which sets out to eliminate hepatitis B and hepatitis C as significant public health threats by 2030. The WHO target is a 90% reduction in incidence

and 65% reduction in mortality due to hepatitis B & C by 2030. Wales is signed up to this strategy.

However, modelling carried out in 2018 showed that, based on treatment rates at the time, Wales was not on track to achieve hepatitis C elimination even by 2030. The impact of Covid-19 has further set back progress towards elimination. Hepatitis C services have been impacted more strongly in Wales than other UK nations during the pandemic. While treatment rates fell markedly in all nations in the immediate wake of the first wave, by July 2020 treatment initiations in England were 42% lower than the previous year. By contrast, by August 2020 treatment initiations in Wales were still 71% lower than the year before.

Public Health Wales is currently developing a Blood-Borne Virus Recovery Strategy but this must be accompanied by wider Government support. Wales is now the only UK nation not to have a target of achieving hepatitis C elimination in advance of the World Health Organization's 2030 target, with England and Northern Ireland having set an ambition of elimination by 2025 and Scotland by the even more ambitious target of 2024.

It is now essential that the next Welsh Government sets out a clear route-map to achieving hepatitis C elimination by 2030 at the latest in order to coordinate and drive progress towards achieving the target. Eliminating hepatitis C would prevent the ill-health of thousands of the most marginalised people in society, significantly contribute to a reduction in drug-related deaths and save money to the public purse. As part the proposed focus on public health and prevention, we strongly encourage the Committee to prioritise hepatitis C.

Question 2: Key priorities for the Sixth Senedd

Q2. In your view, what other key priorities should the Committee consider during the Sixth Senedd in relation to:

- a) health services;
- b) social care and carers;
- c) COVID recovery?

You can comment on as many or few of the issues as you want.

In your answers, you might want to think about:

What impact or outcomes could be achieved through any work by the Committee?

How the Committee might address the issue?

When any Committee work should take place?

Whether there are any specific groups, communities or stakeholders that the Committee should involve or hear from in any work?

a) Health services

As part of the Committee's work in relation to health services, we encourage the Committee to pursue the implementation of the recommendations in the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's report into hepatitis C from June 2019, which are as follows:

Recommendation 1. We recommend that the Welsh Government produces a comprehensive national elimination strategy for hepatitis C, with clear ambitious targets, and workforce planning built in, and provides sustainable funding until elimination is achieved. This must be done as a matter of urgency, given that the current plan will end this year, and funding for dedicated posts is only confirmed until 2021.

Recommendation 2. The strategy must include a targeted awareness raising campaign to reach out to at-risk communities and also provide for education and training for health professionals.

Recommendation 3. The Welsh Government must write to Local Health Board Finance Directors and Chief Executives to emphasise that national treatment targets for hepatitis C must be considered as minimum targets, to be exceeded wherever possible, if the elimination target of 2030 is to be achieved in Wales.

Recommendation 4. We recommend that the Welsh Government provides additional investment to improve Hepatitis C testing in Welsh prisons.

Little progress has been achieved on these recommendations and, as outlined above, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on Wales' progress towards hepatitis C elimination. It is therefore more important than ever that the Welsh Government takes forward the recommendations outlined by the previous Health, Social Care and Sport Committee and we encourage the new Committee to take this forward as a key part of its work in the new Welsh Parliament session.